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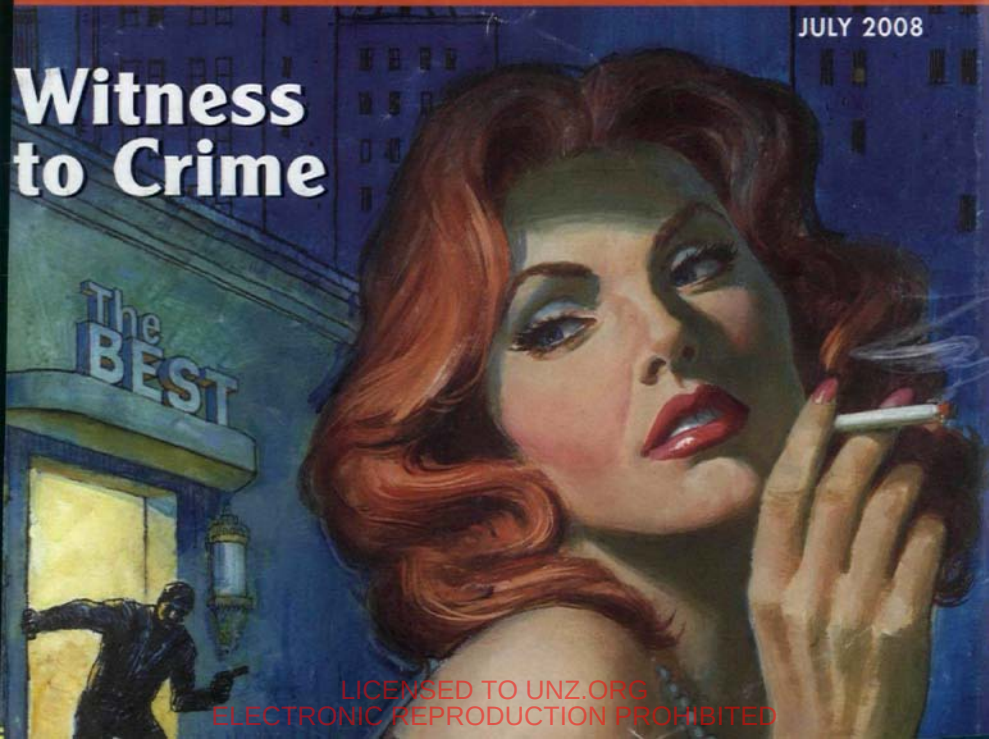

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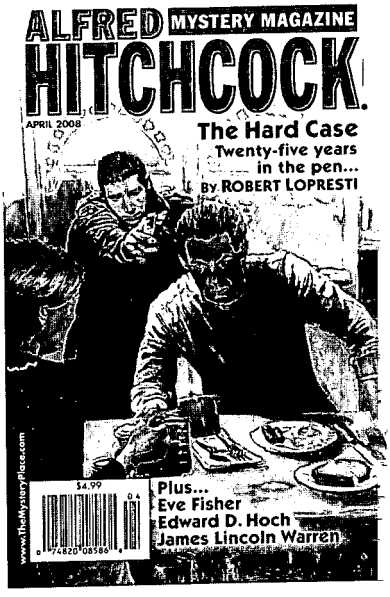

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THE SECRET LIVES OF CATS

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Homer Ziff didn't believe in adages, but after his long and eventful spring, he couldn't help but think that whoever put the words "curiosity," "cat," and "kill" in the same sentence had to be onto something.

It all began with his own curiosity—about his cats. Homer Ziff lived alone with two indoor cats and six outdoor cats. Well, six he could pet and hold; there were others—the friends, neighbors, and hangers-on, he called them—who visited at meal time or for a rest on the back forty in the midafternoon sun.

Not that he had a real back forty. But his backyard was an impressive three acres, complete with woods and stream. One of the reasons he'd bought the house was that it had the best of both worlds: In the front, he had a small lawn that led to a quiet residential street; in the back, he had acres of property that covered a protected wetland. No one would ever build behind him, the lots next to him were full, and the houses across the street had reached their maximum size according to code.

He knew his neighbors by sight (rather like he knew their cats) and he would nod at them whenever he saw them, but didn't engage

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in conversation. He couldn't bring himself to talk to them, not after his first attempt, when he'd stuttered at a man several doors down, and the man had rolled his eyes and walked away.

Homer would like to have blamed his surly neighbor for his own lack of congeniality, but that wouldn't be fair or accurate. Homer didn't engage most people in conversation. He had a stutter that got worse when he was nervous.

Over the years, he'd learned to prefer his own company. He liked being alone with his thoughts and his cats and his property.

Science fiction writer Kristine Kathryn Rusch uses the pseudonym Kris Nelscott when she writes at novel length in the mystery field. Says the *Seattle Times*: "Nelscott excels at setting a scene . . ." and that's true whether the scene is one of big, historical events such as the 1969 Chicago Eight trial, which forms the backdrop to her last P.I. Smokey Dalton novel, *Days of Rage*, or the very small world of cats, which she enters here. †

And it was his thoughts that made being alone possible. Not that his thoughts were original—sadly, they weren't—but they were organized, and that had given him an edge. Once upon a time, he had been a professor of physics at Oregon State University. A rising star when he was hired, he'd become a stalled star by mid career—a man for whom the great things expected never materialized.

Which would have been well and good except that stalled stars had to be stellar teachers and he was not. He was pathologically shy, and his stutter got worse in front of large groups. He was better one on one, but stalled stars weren't allowed to teach the smaller classes. He had to teach some large sections as well, and he dreaded them the way he dreaded a visit to the dentist.

But he did have one valuable skill. He could explain things clearly. His gift of clarity had gotten him through graduate school and into an important teaching position. And it made him into something of a rebel.

Because of his gift, he threw out the suggested text for 101 Physics (a more confusing book he'd never seen) and wrote a series of notes that sold in the campus bookstore—not just to his students, but to students from other physics classes. The bookstore owner called him one day to ask whether students at the nearby University of Oregon could purchase the notes. Then students from some of the private colleges made the drive from McMinnville and Portland to get his notes, and finally, the chairman of his department said, "Y'know, Ziff, you could make a fortune on those notes if you just turned them into a book."

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So he did. It became the number-one 101 Physics text in the country, which led his publisher to ask if he would write a simple physics book for the masses, which he did, and another for children, which he did, and suddenly Homer Ziff no longer needed to worry about being a stalled star. He had become a rising star again—or maybe even an established one—and could have his pick of the courseload within his department.

Only the books had given him another gift. Financial independence. He no longer had to teach. And since standing in front of students made him so nervous that he sometimes spent the hour before class in the restroom, he decided that the prudent move would be to quit.

He bought his marvelous house, made sure his finances were in order, and then retired to write a half-dozen more popular science books, with more under contract.

Some days, the cats were his only companions. He didn't mind, really. He never stuttered when he spoke to cats, and they didn't care that he lacked original thought.

They were happy that he provided food and shelter and a bit of companionship.

He was happy to have them purr.

Because of them, he had become a little cat-obsessed.

He had been surfing the Net one night when he discovered a Web site designed by a man in Germany. The man sounded like a kindred spirit. He lived with a cat to whom he devoted an inordinate amount of time. That cat was an indoor-outdoor cat, and the German man wondered how his cat spent his time outside the house.

So the man, who appeared to be some kind of engineer, modified a digital camera, put it around his cat's neck, set it up to take pictures every minute and a half, and sent the cat on its way. The resulting photographs were charming and inspiring.

Homer found himself staring at his outdoor friends, wondering how their days went. One cat's routine illuminated the life of one cat. Six cats' routines might actually be the beginning of some kind of scientific study.

At least, that was what he told himself as he used the instructions on the German man's Web site to build six "catcams." After some struggle, Homer managed to attach them to five of his outdoor favorites (he gave up on the wily old tom—who not only drew blood, but managed to slice him up badly enough to require fifteen stitches on his left hand).

Then he sent the five on their mission, hoping to discover the secret lives of cats.

And he did. He discovered all sorts of marvelous things.

He saw the same feline faces in his yard, in his neighbor's yard,

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at the century-old schoolhouse down the street. He realized that each cat had not only its own routine, but shared a neighborhood routine as well.

Mornings began at his house, with a treat of kibble and soft food, followed by a trek to the dumpster behind the local Burger King, then a long rest under the bleachers at the old school.

The ground beneath his neighbors' cars and his own Ford pickup served as sites for daily conferences. A house three blocks away provided an afternoon snack, usually followed by dumpster diving at a local fish market and the nearby Dairy Queen.

On warm days, the cats tromped down to the wetlands for drinks from the springs that prevented anyone from building behind Homer's property.

He would have blessed those springs, if he hadn't seen something curious.

On the earliest photos the springs looked like a primeval swampland. Cats, due to their low-to-the-ground perspective, took the most amazing photographs. Apparently the wetlands at dawn (or was it dusk?) had ground fog, which made everything opaque and surreal.

The swamp (he didn't know what else to call it) had tree limbs and branches and sticks rising from the muck, all hidden by the ghostlike grayness of the fog. To his surprise, the cats didn't drink from the water here. They sat in front of it—all five of them—as if they were watching something.

Subsequent photos on different days showed something that resembled an elephants' graveyard. What he'd initially thought were tree branches were bones sticking out of the mud. Some of the bones were covered in moss. Others had ivy growing around them like large green cobwebs.

The ivy gave him some perspective, but not enough. He couldn't tell what kind of bones these were. Cats are small creatures and the cameras took photographs from that small perspective. Bones which seemed huge in some photographs seemed tiny in others.

Those others, he soon realized, were taken from some kind of height. Either that particular feline photographer had climbed a tree or it sat on a bank or it watched from a stump.

Homer found it curious that the cats never got close to the elephants' graveyard. They always sat back. But as the weeks went on and the photographs accumulated, Homer realized that the graveyard was a spring haunt, just like the school had been in the winter.

The cats weren't interested in food; they were observing something.

And that intrigued him.

Because cats, like humans, had a scientific turn of mind.

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He had noticed that scientific frame of mind from the day he brought home his first kitten. Cats not only studied things, they made a study of things. One of his cats decided to probe the mysteries of ice cubes—how they turned into water, whether they could be carried, why they sometimes shattered. Another spent an entire week learning how the front doorknob turned. Eventually that cat learned how to turn the knob herself; fortunately she never did figure out the necessity of pulling the door open.

Or maybe opening the door didn't interest her. The front door was the only one with a cut-glass doorknob. It refracted light. The cat may have been more interested in the prisms inside the knob than in using that knob to go outside.

Homer never mentioned these thoughts to anyone else. He often felt as if he put too much time into his cats. And then he discovered that German man's Web site, and realized he was not alone in his obsession with cat thought.

But, Homer would have wagered, the German man did not have an entire second computer devoted to the photographs that the cats created. Nor, Homer suspected, did the German man spend as much time trying to figure out what his cats were thinking as they stared—not just at the elephants' graveyard, but also from underneath cars or beside dumpsters.

The cats seemed involved in a part of life that Homer had somehow missed.

As the spring went on, he realized the cats were studying the elephants' graveyard the same way that his indoor cat had studied that doorknob. They just hadn't gotten to the touching stage yet.

He would know when they did. Daily, he got a series of photos of the backs of pink tongues, lapping water from a puddle or a stream or a bowl that someone had placed outside. He would get photographs of near-dead prey wriggling out of a mouth.

But he saw nothing like that near the bones.

Only cats, watching the swampy water as if it held the secret of the universe.

Then, one Sunday afternoon, everything changed.

A little white female he called Mata Hari, because of her attractiveness to the males (even after she was fixed) and her tendency to wander off on dangerous and secretive missions of her own, brought home a defining photograph.

Every day, she sat in the same spot near the swamp. The little camera around her neck took a variation of the same photograph—a bone fragment sticking out of the primordial ooze. Sometimes the fragment was brown with mud and sometimes it looked almost white. But over time, he realized it was the same fragment, which meant she sat in the same spot daily, studying something that she felt was important.

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Only that Sunday, the fragment was covered by a human hand.

The hand loomed in the photograph, the fingers dominating the scene. They rose upward toward the sky, the ridges of the knuckles visible against the blackness of the muck. Dried cuts marred the flesh along the back, and the fingernails—clipped short—had dirt embedded all the way down to the skin.

Mata Hari had brought home ten pictures of the hand, which meant she spent fifteen minutes contemplating it, twice as long as she usually spent at that spot. The cat had managed to get several different angles, and oddly, each was farther away than the previous one.

The hand put the other bones in perspective. He returned to his photo files, opened the relevant pictures next to the photo of the hand, and compared.

His breath caught. What had seemed like animal bones—small and fragile, old, abandoned, like elephants in their graveyard—were not. They were too large. He had been more accurate with the foggy photos when he'd thought of the bones as branches and logs.

These bones were large. No domesticated animal, except maybe a Husky or a Rottweiler, would have bones like that. Nor would most of the wild animals around here. This area was too populated for bears, even with the wetlands below. Maybe a deer or two had died down there, but certainly not a bunch of them. The coyotes were the size of raccoons, and barely larger than the cats, and there were no wolves here.

Which left only one other creature that could have provided the bones.

Humans.

And the latest victim had just arrived.

He needed to know if any of the other cats had photographs of the hand.

He got up and peered out his window. Two of the other cats had returned. He stepped outside and removed the memory card from both cameras, careful to put in a new card before he shut the cameras off. He'd tried night photos before, but the flash had scared the cat so badly that it had run in circles, screaming.

He hadn't known cats could scream.

He gave each cat some pets and a small treat, then went back inside and downloaded the photographs.

In every bunch, a handful were duds—blurs, unrecognizable objects, a paw in front of the lens. These two batches were no different. But he set aside the blurs and unrecognizable objects this time, deciding they might be useful.

Then he scanned the images until he got to the swamp.

These cats had come to the graveyard as well, and at about the same time as Mata Hari. In fact, one of the unrecognizable objects

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might have been her haunch as the other cat sniffed her in greeting.

These cats stayed even farther away. He found photographs of an entire arm, covered in bruises, and a bit of shoulder. His hands were shaking as he magnified the images.

The arm and hand had clearly come from the same place. He could see the bone fragment, the moss-covered bones, the ivy-covered bones, and the brackish water. Now he knew why the cats didn't drink here.

He wasn't even sure why they came—they were well fed, so they didn't need to eat decaying flesh. Were they watching something decompose? Or were they hunting the rats or some other creature that frequented the wetlands?

For the first time since he started this experiment, he felt frustrated that he couldn't ask.

And then he found the money shot.

Or what would have been a money shot had he been a photographer along the lines of Weegee—the man who photographed corpses at crime scenes.

This shot was worthy of Weegee as well: a naked woman, her back arched, arms and legs splayed over what he had once thought were branches, her face turned toward the camera.

His shaking grew worse as he magnified this image. Her face had no real expression. The mouth was open, battered and bloody, the nose flattened, the cheeks covered in either blood or dirt.

But the eyes got to him. The eyes didn't look human. They looked like something out of a bad horror movie—filmed over with white, unfocused, and empty. It wasn't even fair to say that they were staring, because they weren't. There was no intelligence behind them, no thought, no anything.

He leaned away from the computer and frowned. Something about the image was familiar. At first he thought it was simply the way the woman had fallen, and then he realized what it was.

She had come to his door. Four days ago. She'd parked her SUV against the curb, the windows open, her daughter—who was ten, maybe eleven—crying inside.

The woman had knocked, and he almost didn't answer because she looked so angry. But when he pulled the door open, she smiled at him.

"My daughter is selling candy so that her band can go to the regional tournaments." She opened the box. "Would you like to buy something?"

He didn't look at the candy. He looked at the crying girl in the SUV, wondering what her story was. He could probably guess. She didn't want to sell the candy, but her mother had tried to force her. And when that hadn't worked, the mother decided to do it herself.

"She's shy," her mother said, as if confirming his thoughts.

He couldn't condone this kind of behavior, not from an adult. He

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hated bullying in all its forms, having been a victim of it when he was young and skinny and too nerdy for his own good.

But the woman made him nervous, and he couldn't say what he wanted to, which was, *Let your daughter be herself. Not everyone is a good salesperson.* Or good with people. Or even good one-on-one.

Instead, he struggled with, "N-N-No th-th-thanks."

And shut the door.

The woman remained on the porch for a moment, as if she couldn't believe he'd been that rude, and then she'd walked back to the SUV. She'd tossed the box of candy at her poor daughter before getting inside and driving away.

If she was here, in this swamp, somewhere in the neighborhood, where was the little girl?

He was reaching for the phone before he even realized what he was doing, and dialed 911. When the operator answered, he said, "I think there's a dead body in my neighborhood."

And that brought the detectives to his door.

They were in plain clothes, but they showed him badges. He recognized both detectives from the local paper. They had been working on some kind of task force, and they had their pictures in the Metro section often enough that he could almost remember their names.

Fortunately for him, he didn't need to. They introduced themselves.

The man with the silver hair trimmed so close to his neck that it looked like whiskers was Detective DeCarovich. His partner, a woman who looked like she could bench-press Homer without any effort, was Detective Ortiz.

They came inside Homer's house without invitation, and wanted to know where he had seen the body. He brought them the photograph, which he'd printed out on his laser printer, and they asked again where he had seen her.

So he had to explain—slowly because his stutter acted up—about the cat cameras and the experiment. The detectives stared at him as if he were crazy, so he finally waved them over to the computer and showed them the German man's home page, complete with instructions on how to build the camera.

Ortiz was the one who finally realized that Homer was serious. She turned to him, her dark eyes wide and stunned. "You did this with your own cats?"

Then she turned toward Princess, his pampered white Persian, who looked like she had starred in the Fancy Feast commercials. Princess was lying on top of the red satin pillow he had placed on his couch as a joke, and she looked about as indolent as a cat could get.

"Not her," he said. "The outdoor cats. The more or less feral ones."

DeCarovich crossed his arms. He clearly didn't believe Homer

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and might even think Homer had something to do with the woman's death.

Homer crooked a finger. "Come with me," he said. "But quietly."

He led them into the kitchen, which overlooked the back forty. Fortunately, Mata Hari was in her afternoon spot, on top of a rock near an overgrown rhododendron, stretched out and sound asleep.

"See that box around her neck?" he said. "It has her camera in it. There are four other cats with cameras as well."

"Forgodsake," DeCarovich said and shook his head. He clearly wasn't impressed. He acted more like a man who had thought he'd seen it all, only to be surprised by something this weird. "Why would you do that?"

"Curiosity," Homer said. "I wondered what they do all day."

"Eat and sleep," Ortiz said.

"Actually, no," Homer said. "They're quite active . . ."

And then he let his voice trail off. The detectives weren't interested in his cats. They were interested in the photographs. DeCarovich was looking at the dead woman again.

"You really don't know where this is," DeCarovich said.

"No," Homer said. "And I'm not even sure it's on my property. It could be anywhere in the neighborhood."

"Or farther," Ortiz said. "Cats can have a territory of twenty acres or more."

DeCarovich turned toward her as if she had suddenly gone as crazy as Homer.

She shrugged. "I grew up around cats."

DeCarovich let out a small laugh, the kind a person used when he discovered he was among people he thought beneath him. Homer had heard that laugh a lot as a kid, and he didn't miss it.

His face heated, and his throat tightened. The stutter would get even worse. He knew the symptoms. He had to struggle just to start his next sentence, but he knew the tricks: Don't get stuck on one word. Instead, recast your sentence into something else.

"M-M-Maybe I can reconstruct where they go," he said. He led the detectives back into his study so that he could open the computer photo files. "I have d-d-days' worth of photos. Maybe th-th-there are l-l-landmarks."

He called up the files and started with the swamp and elephant-graveyard photos, working backwards through each cat's imagery file. He wished now he hadn't thrown out most of the blurred and unfocused photos. They might tell him something.

Ortiz was leaning over his shoulder as he worked. DeCarovich walked through the room, studying Homer's books and his framed awards.

"You wrote these?" he asked after a moment.

"Y-Y-Yes," Homer said.

"Science guy, huh?"

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He wanted to go for a self-deprecating "kinda" but the "k" would give him trouble. He had to settle for another stammered "yes."

"I guess guys like you would do stuff like this. Experiments, huh?"

But Homer was careful not to answer that vague a question. He still had the sense DeCarovich believed he was involved in that woman's death.

"Th-Th-The p-p-pictures?"

"Yeah." DeCarovich looked at him.

Homer nodded. His throat had tightened so badly he knew he wouldn't be able to get out another sentence easily.

"Damn," Ortiz said beside him. "These cats go underneath everything."

They did, too. Under leaves, between bushes, under rocks. There was no clear trail, nothing recognizable, at least to human eyes.

"You actually think this guy's onto something?" DeCarovich asked, no longer trying to hide his contempt.

"I think we finally found the boneyard," Ortiz said, and Homer was the one who shuddered.

He remembered the articles now. These detectives had just formed a task force to investigate a series of missing-persons cases, all women in their thirties who disappeared in broad daylight.

"Except we didn't find it, not yet," Ortiz was saying. "These cats can't tell us where it is and if we try to follow them, we'll make sure they never go there again."

"We'll have to do a grid search," DeCarovich said.

"And destroy a lot of physical evidence along the way." Ortiz sighed. "At least now we know what happened to Ann Kemmel."

"Th-Th-That's the woman?" Homer asked.

Ortiz nodded.

"Wh-Wh-What about her daughter?"

Both detectives stared at him as if he had just confessed. He swallowed and forced himself to tell them about the incident with the candy bars and the SUV.

"F-F-Four days ago," he said.

"That's when she disappeared," DeCarovich said. "Only her kid wasn't with her. Her kid was at home the whole time."

Homer shook his head. "I saw her. She was in th-th-the c-c-car."

"How would you know?" DeCarovich asked.

"She was c-c-crying real hard." He felt his face get even redder. "I th-th-thought her mother was b-b-being mean."

DeCarovich's eyes narrowed, but Ortiz didn't seem to notice. She turned toward him.

He raised his eyebrows. "I thought we were too easy on her."

"I can't believe she was lying," Ortiz said. "She must have seen something. I'll bet she was scared."

DeCarovich shook his head. "She was just another—"

He waved his hand at Homer, and Homer wondered what word

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DeCarovich left out.

"She st-st-st . . ." Homer couldn't say the word. He never could under stress. "She has a speech d-d-defect?"

"Like you," DeCarovich said.

Homer nodded. He had been right, then. The mother had been treating her like his mother had treated him, believing that he could overcome his problems with just a little more hard work.

"She was in the car," Ortiz said. "She was lying."

"Lying," Homer said slowly so that he wouldn't stutter anymore, "makes a speech problem worse. Any stress, even small stress, will make the problem worse."

He got it out without a single mistake. His cheeks grew even hotter. DeCarovich frowned at him, but it was no longer the frown of the impatient. It was a frown of consideration.

"You think the kid saw something?" he asked Homer, and Homer got that sense again that DeCarovich still suspected him.

Homer's throat tightened, so he shrugged.

"I'll bet she did," Ortiz said. "We need to reinterview."

"With the photographic evidence." DeCarovich picked up the printout. "Can we keep this?"

Homer nodded.

"She's going to be just as afraid of us as she was the last time," Ortiz sighed.

Homer knew what she was imagining. Trying to interview a child whose mouth continually betrayed her would be difficult at best.

Ortiz took the photograph from DeCarovich. "Too bad you can't put a video camera on those cats. Then we could just find the body and the evidence. There's bound to be some if he's been using that spot for the past five years."

Five years. Homer started. They were investigating five years' worth of disappearances? Five years of dumping dead women into a primeval swamp?

"It c-c-can't be t-t-too cl-cl-close," Homer said. "We'd smell it. Me and the neighbors. Bodies . . ."

He didn't have to finish his sentence. Ortiz was nodding.

"You're right," she said. "We need a topo map."

"You want wind charts too?" DeCarovich was being sarcastic.

"I'm serious," Ortiz said. "If we can find the body without talking to that kid—"

"We have to talk to her," DeCarovich said. "We have to know why she lied."

Homer knew DeCarovich was right. But the two thoughts—the video camera and that little girl—gave him an idea.

"D-D-Don't show her the photograph," he said. "She won't be able t-t-to t-t-talk after th-th-that."

"Listen, buddy," DeCarovich said, but Ortiz put a hand on his arm.

Homer made himself take a deep breath. "What I meant was I

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might b-b-be able t-t-to modify the c-c-cameras. Instead of every ninety seconds, I might be able t-t-to have images every five."

"Which would just show us more leaves and trees and rocks," DeCarovich said. "Nice try, but that's going to give us more of the same."

"No," Ortiz said. "It won't. It might show us where the cats go into the woods. Can you set up a time stamp too?"

"Yes," Homer said. "If we know where they go in, the angle of the sun might tell us what direction they're going."

He realized after he spoke that he was no longer nervous. He liked the female detective. She didn't intimidate him.

"These cats aren't looking up," DeCarovich said. "We can't see sunlight."

"Through the leaves, on the ground, we'll get some stuff. C'mon, Rick," Ortiz said. "You've done similar things with shadow."

"I still think we do a grid."

"Let's give Mr. Ziff a chance," Ortiz said. "His cats might help us."

DeCarovich snorted. "Like they can do that."

"They already have," Ortiz said. "They gave us Ann Kemmel, and a reason to reinterview her daughter."

DeCarovich glared at Homer. "You get one day for this nonsense. One day. After that, we do a grid."

As if Homer had a stake in not having a grid search. He just wanted them to find this poor woman's body. And figure out what else was down in that swamp.

Near his house.

Someone had been dumping bodies near his house. Near the safest place he knew.

He shuddered.

"Would you like a c-c-copy of th-th-the photo files?" he asked Ortiz.

"Yeah," she said. "We have some computer whizzes who might find some answers here. And give me the URL for that German Web site, so they know this is legit."

He nodded, made copies onto a CD, and wrote down the Web address for her.

She tapped him on the arm as a thank-you. "This is kinda cool," she said, holding up the CD in the jewel case he'd given her. "Who knew that cats did such interesting things?"

"Yeah," DeCarovich said as he led her out the door. "Like staring at dead bodies. Who knew?"

Homer couldn't let DeCarovich's sarcasm and attitude get to him, even though it brought back not only Homer's high-school days, but his teaching days as well. More than once, he'd caught his students in the hall, making fun of his stutter. Often they were the students from his 101 Physics class, and it was right after the unit on particles.

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He had no trouble discussing electrons and protons or baryons and mesons. But quarks. Quarks caught him every time. That "ka" sound tripped him up and it got worse the longer he taught. The closer he got to the discussion of elementary particles, the more difficulty he would have.

Just like that little girl. He wished he could interview her. His stutter would put her at ease. She would be able to tell him what she saw or didn't see. She would be able to tell him how she survived when her mother hadn't.

He sighed and turned to the project at hand. He was glad he still had that sixth camera, the one the old tom had fought off. Homer was able to experiment with it. He couldn't set the timer for five seconds—it simply didn't work—but it could go off every ten seconds.

The problem was that it used a lot of energy when it took that many pictures. He found some larger memory cards, but he didn't have adequate batteries, and it was too late to buy any new ones.

So he would have to pick his times, hoping he got the right part of the day.

Then he checked his cupboards. He had a lot of canned salmon and tuna. He would need it. He would have to catch each of his feral photographers, remove their cameras, modify them, and reattach them. Then he'd have to catch the group again tomorrow and remove the memory card.

Twenty-four hours really wasn't enough.

But it was all he had.

By dawn, he had replaced the cameras on all of the cats.

Mata Hari was the first to return. She brought him a lovely series of photographs of the undercarriage of every car on the street. Just as the memory of the camera filled, she had crawled under a fence near the school.

He wondered if that was where she would go to get to the swamp, but he had no way of knowing.

He removed the camera, reset its automatic timer to begin shooting later the following day, but knew it would do no good.

DeCarovich would hold to the twenty-four-hour rule. The man probably still suspected Homer. Homer knew that by now, his fingerprints would have been removed from the jewel case to see if he had a criminal record (he did not) and the computer-crimes unit would make sure that he hadn't dummied up the German Web site. They would find that he hadn't faked the Web site and that his cats had been taking pictures now for more than a month.

DeCarovich would also check Homer's work history, his phone usage (which was almost nil), and his bank records, which would probably surprise the detective. Popular science books made money—even if men like DeCarovich weren't interested.

Although Homer didn't know how someone like DeCarovich

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couldn't be interested. His job was all about science. Just on this case alone, they'd be using topographic maps and sunlight angles; they'd be removing fingerprints and studying computer records; they'd probably be using DNA to identify what was left of the other bodies.

Just by that quick reckoning, Homer figured their work would touch on geography, physics, computer science, biology, and chemistry. And all of it—even the deductive reasoning that DeCarovich was probably using to continue to blame Homer—required a meticulousness that only the best scientists could achieve.

So Homer had to hope that the other cats would bring him something, something recognizable.

Something good.

The answers he sought came, surprisingly, from Einstein—a small, shy male with a shock of white hair over his tiny furrowed brow. Einstein had been difficult to conquer: It had taken weeks to catch him to neuter him, and weeks after that to regain his trust. That he wore a camera at all was amazing; that he actually showed Homer the trail to the body was a shock.

Homer thought Einstein was one of the few cats who didn't make a daily pilgrimage to the swamp. Apparently he did go, just didn't stay as long as the others, and so sometimes he didn't get a good photograph. Also, Einstein was the cat whose photos were most likely to blur because he ran almost everywhere.

But on this morning he meandered toward the swamp through the hole in the fence that Mata Hari had found, around a stone with the year 1908 carved into the top, and then down an embankment into a copse of trees.

Einstein actually followed a tiny trail. Homer hadn't noticed it on the previous shots because it looked like a bare line in the earth, nothing spectacular. But on the ten-second shots, it was clear that the bare line was connected to other bare lines—a rabbit path that wound around the 1908 rock and into the trees.

There he saw a moss-covered old-growth stump from some ancient logging, and several late-blooming irises in front of a ruined log that Einstein crawled on top of to peer into the swamp.

The body looked worse today; less like the woman Homer had met and more like a corpse. Einstein had gotten several good pictures of it, and Homer didn't study any of them.

Instead, he copied the entire memory card onto a CD, printed the files, and called Ortiz.

She wasn't at the station. The dispatch patched him into her cell. She answered on the fourth ring, sounding annoyed.

Homer identified himself, then said, "I think I know where the path is."

"Thank God," she said. "We'll be right there."

And they were. Within fifteen minutes, they had parked in front

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of his house. DeCarovich looked less dyspeptic today, but Ortiz seemed frustrated.

They had been talking to the little Kemmel girl when Homer called, although "talking," DeCarovich said, "isn't really the word for it."

Homer didn't ask about it. He figured they'd tell him if they wanted to. It wasn't his investigation, after all. He was just helping with one small part.

He put the printed photographs in a line, with little gaps between them. Next to them, he put a map of this section of the neighborhood.

"See this?" he said, pointing to the fence. "That's part of this house."

He pointed to a house not far from the school.

"And this rock?" he said. "It's behind the school. They christened it last year as part of a rededication. It's been there since the school was built."

He had highlighted what he believed to be the path leading into the trees.

"I figure you can use the landmarks—the irises, the old-growth stump, the log—to find her."

"You didn't look?" DeCarovich asked.

Homer frowned at him. No one in his right mind would investigate this on his own, not when he understood the science of trace and the importance of keeping a crime scene uncontaminated.

"No," Homer said. "I figure th-th-that's your job."

The stutter surprised him. He thought he was confident enough in his map not to tighten up. But that hint of a threat in DeCarovich's voice had been enough to bring back the stutter.

"We need to go down there," DeCarovich said.

"Let's send a team," Ortiz said, studying the photos.

"Let's not waste taxpayer dollars until we know we're in the right place."

For once, Homer agreed with DeCarovich. They didn't say much more to him. They took the printed photographs, the map, and the CD, and then they left.

He felt at loose ends. Despite his sensible thoughts about the crime scene, he did want to investigate it himself. He wished he were more involved.

After all, his cats had been the ones to discover what Ortiz had called the body dump. If only they were trained cats. He could send them down the path to the swamp with cameras around their neck and watch as the detectives officially found Ann Kemmel's body.

But he couldn't assign the cats anything, and he could only view what they wanted to look at. Mostly, all they cared about was the undercarriage of cars.

Then he frowned and headed toward his computer. The cats

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loved the undercarriages of SUVs more than actual cars. SUVs had big tires and a wider frame, but a lower undercarriage than a truck. That gave the cat a lot of places to hide and even more places to visit with little feline friends, all in the comfort of a shady spot on the street.

But one photo had come to mind. A photo taken by yet another cat—Galileo—somewhere around the time of the candy-selling incident. It had been a blur photo, and Homer had tossed it, but he hadn't yet cleared off the memory card.

He grabbed all the cards that needed clearing and started cycling through them one by one. He didn't find any more images of the path to the swamp—he knew he wouldn't—but he did find several of a parked SUV with unfamiliar tires.

And then he found the photograph he was looking for. Two photographs, actually. One of a skinny leg with a single pink girl's tennis shoe about to touch the pavement—and another of a pink-and-blue blur disappearing behind a bench across the street.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember what that crying girl had been wearing that afternoon. He just remembered her face, splotchy and humiliated, her eyes swollen from all the tears she'd shed. He could also remember the SUV, with its blue and silver metallic sides.

Silver, like the side where the pants leg brushed.

He opened his eyes and studied the next two frames. He didn't see any more pink-and-blue blurs, but he did know where that bench was. It was several doors down from his house, right across the street from his surly neighbor, the man who had rolled his eyes when he'd heard the ferocity of Homer's stutter.

Homer went cold.

He wondered if he should call Ortiz. He didn't want to bother her, not when she was looking at the crime scene.

Instead, he opened a file on his computer, looked at the neighborhood map he'd downloaded earlier, and studied the wetlands.

They not only ran behind his house, they ran the entire length of this side of the street, ending (or beginning, depending on your point of view) at the century-old schoolhouse.

Anyone who wanted to could carry a body across their own personal back forty into the wetlands and walk through the overgrown wooded area to the swamp without being seen.

No wonder DeCarovich had suspected Homer. Homer fit all kinds of profiles. He was reclusive. He lived alone. He had access to the so-called body dump. He even inserted himself in the investigation.

His hands were shaking again. He wasn't sure if he had important information or not. The two detectives were still having trouble talking to the daughter. But Homer had evidence she left the SUV on her own and ran away.

Before or after her mother had disappeared?

He logged onto the Internet and looked up what he could find on

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the disappearance of Ann Kemmel. She only rated a few paragraphs in the paper on the day after her disappearance. But those few paragraphs were enough.

She and the SUV were missing.

She was last seen here on his quiet block in the middle of the afternoon on the day she disappeared, selling band candy for her daughter.

Just like he'd said.

He sank deeper into his chair. His mouth was dry. He was innocent. Ortiz knew that or she would have confiscated his computer. They would have come into his house with a warrant.

Or maybe they were waiting to find the body.

Maybe they needed just a little more for probable cause.

A knock on the door snapped him out of his reverie. His heart was pounding and his face was already flushed. He knew he looked guilty. For all his caution, he had done so much wrong.

It would only be a matter of time before someone would come to arrest him.

He managed to leave his study, walk across his living room, and peer through the glass in the door.

Ortiz stood there, arms folded behind her back. There was no sign of DeCarovich.

When she saw Homer, she nodded. She didn't smile.

Here it was: fair warning. She had come to ask if she could search his house. He would tell her to get a warrant. He would use his small fortune to hire the best criminal defense attorney in the state. He might even get his publisher's publicist to get him some interviews on his good Samaritan deed gone wrong.

He pulled open the door.

"We found her." Ortiz sounded tired. "And the others, most likely. I just wanted you to know. Your cats were right."

He waited for her to say the next part, the part about searching his house or getting a warrant. But she didn't.

She seemed to be done.

"Wow," he said. "The photos worked?"

"There was a cat path," she said. "The lab techs are down there now. It's a mess. But no one would have smelled it. Too far from houses. Too far from that school."

"The cats had to know."

"The cats must have smelled something decaying, but it didn't interest them. None of them are starving."

He smiled in spite of himself. Her comment had echoed his thoughts.

And besides, she'd seen his outdoor cats. They clearly weren't starving.

"Um," he said. "I was wondering one other thing. Th-th-that girl?

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Did she run away from her mother?"

Ortiz frowned at him. "How did you know?"

"I th-th-think I found some more pictures."

She came inside without asking, but she did take off her shoes. They had a swampy smell—or maybe she did—the beginnings of decay.

Princess and his other indoor cat, King, came out of the bedroom, sniffing the air. So that smell did attract them.

"I think I found pictures of the SUV," he said, and told her about the underbellies of cars, how cats socialized there, and how much they seemed to like a shady spot on the road.

"We were talking to her when you called," Ortiz said. "Poor kid. She's going to need therapy for the rest of her life."

He looked at the detective. She was already peering at the photographs on his computer.

"Why?"

"She says her mother went inside a house to sell band candy, and she ran away. She went to her grandmother's, but her grandmother brought her home."

"And no one saw the mother again."

"That's right," Ortiz said. "Missing Persons wasn't even that interested since the SUV was gone too. They figured the mother had run off."

He pointed out the skinny leg, the pink shoes, the blur of blue-and-pink across the street.

"And you know where this is, don't you?" Ortiz said.

He nodded.

She grinned at him. "Too bad we can't put those cats of yours on payroll."

"You wouldn't like them as employees," he said. "They go their own way."

And it wasn't until after she left, with more printed photographs and more files on CD, that he realized he had had an entire conversation with a woman he liked and hadn't stammered.

At least, not much.

He thought of it as a victory.

He didn't realize it was also the beginning of an odyssey.

Ortiz and DeCarovich got a search warrant for the surly neighbor's house and found blood in the basement, and all sorts of other grisly things. The man had done exactly what Homer had hypothesized: killed the women (after abusing them sexually), then waited until dark and carried their bodies through the wetlands to the wider swampy area, dumping them there. Sometimes he would move their cars before he killed them, sometimes afterwards.

DeCarovich believed that there was a car dump like there was a body dump, but so far, no one had found it.

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Ortiz kept Homer apprised of all of it. She even visited him a few times, always asking about his cats. Finally she told him she wanted to go to dinner with him, but she couldn't, not until the trial was over.

The trial. He hadn't thought of it. The grand jury, the testimony. The cross-examination.

He could already see what was coming:

He was a central part of the case—actually, his cats were—and he would feel like a failing professor all over again. Stammering his way through his stories, wishing that he could find a way to mitigate the talking part, and still explain—meticulously—his role in the arrest.

He decided to write out his testimony, to plan it, detail by detail. And as he did, he threaded the photographs through the text.

It only took him a week to figure out what he had.

A true-crime book.

An unusual true-crime book.

No one else had ever written anything like it.

He summoned up his courage and showed it to his agent. She loved it. She proposed a few other books as well—one just a book of photography by his cats. She showed him a curious coffee-table book from several years before of cats painting (actually just sweeping their paint-covered paws over walls and floors) and told him it had been a bestseller.

He agreed to do it all, but prosecutors wanted him to wait until his testimony was finished so that he wouldn't be accused of helping the police for money.

He wondered how anyone would think he had rigged his cameras to his feral cats for money, but he knew that people could believe anything.

So he waited. And he testified. And he did feel humiliated.

Until Detective Ortiz—her first name was Susan—took him out for a celebratory steak dinner. She had praised him, called him brilliant, and even said he was interesting.

He didn't feel interesting.

But he liked her attention.

He liked her.

He was so glad that the case had wrapped up quickly. He had been a star witness—not *the* star witness, though. That proved to be the little girl, with her father at her side, pointing out the man she'd last seen with her mother.

The surly neighbor, who no longer rolled his eyes at people who stuttered.

They had convicted him, two of the people he held in contempt. They had ended his life on the outside.

Two stammerers—two momentary stars—and five wandering cats, reluctantly sharing their secret lives bit by tiny bit. ●

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MADAM SING'S GOLD

by Edward D. Hoch

In 1884, when he was young, Ben Snow had spent the summer rounding up wild horses in Nevada. When the season ended in September, he crossed into California and followed the San Joaquin River north toward Sacramento, riding Oats at a leisurely pace because he had money in his pocket and not a care in the world. He'd stopped in one town and bought himself a red plaid vest to celebrate his temporary wealth.

Ben was perhaps forty miles east of the capital when he spotted a column of smoke rising from a town by the river. He spurred Oats to a gallop and rode into the town, anxious to lend a hand if help was needed. Almost at once he was met by a horde of Chinese women and children, fleeing the fire. He slid off his horse, stabled it, and stopped one of the women. "What's happening?" he asked.

"They set fire to Chinatown!" she managed to gasp out, barely halting in her escape from the flames.

Ben started running too, against the crowd. He expected to come upon townspeople fighting the blaze, but instead he was confronted by a sheriff and his deputies keeping everyone away. "What's going on?" he asked the man with the biggest badge and the largest stomach. "I'll help fight the fire."

The sheriff snickered. "We don't need no help. We're burnin' down the whole damn Chinatown."

"There are women and children—"

"We want 'em outta here. We already shot most of the men."

Ben couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Shot them? What for?"

"Their women are prostitutes. We've got a half-dozen young men down with syphilis from them."

"Aren't they allowed arrest and trial?"

Ben Snow is one of Edward D. Hoch's less frequently seen characters. This is the first new case for the cowboy sleuth since the November 2006 issue. In that appearance it was 1901 and the itinerant Ben was in New Orleans. We go back 17 years in this new story, and across the country, to Sacramento. New cases for other favorite Hoch characters (Rand and Stanton & Ives) are coming up later this year. †

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"No need to, with Chinks. You ever hear of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 'eighty-two? It bars all Chinese skilled and unskilled laborers from entering the country for ten years. We're taking it one step further, excluding the ones who are already here."

"What's your name?" Ben asked.

"Wally Knight. Sheriff Knight." He snickered again, hand on his six-gun. "If you're gonna report me, make sure you spell it right, with a K like in kill."

Ben turned and walked away, half wondering if he might get a bullet in the back. He caught up with one of the fleeing Chinese girls and pulled her aside. "Do you speak English?"

"Yes, yes! I fear the man with the badge. He kill so many."

"What's your name?"

"Chin Loo." Her pretty young face was stained with soot from the fire.

"Come with me, Chin Loo," Ben told her, leading the way down an alley between two frail wooden buildings. Once out of the sheriff's sight, he asked her what had happened.

"My father brought us here to work on the railroad," she explained. "I was a baby then, nearly twenty years ago. He thought there was gold in the streets, but there was no gold, not for us."

"Do you have a mother?"

"She died when I was fifteen."

"And your father?"

"Back there," she muttered, gesturing over her shoulder. Ben didn't know if she meant dead or alive. Perhaps she didn't know either.

"Where's your home?" he asked. "I'll take you there."

"I stay at Madam Sing's house. I clean there, nothing else."

He wanted to ask more, but a single horseman with a rifle turned into the alley and would have trampled them had not Ben pulled her to the side. The horseman wheeled, raising the rifle with his free hand and pointing it at the girl. Ben leaped high and grabbed the barrel just as the rider pulled the trigger. He yanked at the rifle and pulled the man from the saddle, tumbling him to the ground.

"Where I come from, we don't shoot women," he told the man, kicking the rifle from his grasp.

"I'm a deputy," the man growled, trying to rise, "and you're under arrest!"

Ben ignored him and grabbed the girl's arm. "Come on!"

But by then it was too late. Horsemen had blocked both ends of the alley and Sheriff Knight himself appeared, gun in hand. "Arrest them both," he ordered.

Ben Snow spent the night in a jail cell. He slept very little, wondering what had become of the Chinese girl. Shortly after dawn he was awakened by a deputy who unlocked the cell door and motioned him outside. "Come on, the sheriff wants to see you."

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Sheriff Knight was in his tiny cluttered office, seated behind a desk against a backdrop of a gun rack holding a half-dozen rifles. He patted his stomach and asked, "Where you from, lad?"

"Here and there."

The sheriff grunted. "You wear your holster like a gunfighter."

"I've spent the whole summer rounding up wild horses over in Nevada. I was just passing through your town, following the river."

"What were you doing with that girl?"

"Trying to save her from being killed."

"She's one of Madam Sing's whores. They've infected our boys with disease. You better let us handle her."

"She told me she only cleaned there, nothing else."

Sheriff Knight snorted. "That's what they all say. This place is better off without a Chinatown, believe me!"

"What about the people who were living there?"

"If they're smart, they've scattered. Some of the towns around here, the vigilantes rounded up the Chinese, took them out of town and shot 'em."

"Is that what happened to Madam Sing?"

"Far as I know, she's still alive. She was pawing through the remains of her house this morning, trying to recover some of her gold. These Chinks go wild for anything gold."

"Am I free to go?"

"Sure, ride right out of town and make everyone happy. Your horse is at the stable."

"Let me take the girl too. We'll leave town together."

The sheriff gave a nasty snicker. "Want your own private whore, huh? Sure, why not?" He shouted for one of his deputies. "Russell, release that Chin Loo. This cowboy wants her."

She was brought in a few minutes later and he saw from the bruise on her face that it had not been an easy night. He whispered her to silence until they were away. "What did they do to you?" he asked.

"That deputy, Russell, he hit me. He called me names."

"You're out of there now. I want to find Madam Sing if I can. She may be able to take care of you."

"I saw two of her girls killed," Chin Loo told him. "She might be dead, too."

They picked up his horse at the stable and he bought another one for Chin Loo. Whether she stayed with him or not, she'd probably need a horse. "Let's ride over to Madam Sing's house," he suggested. "The sheriff said she was seen there this morning searching through the ruins."

Much of the three-block Chinatown area lay in ruins that were still smoking from the fire. Here and there young women and an occasional man pawed through the charred timbers in search of whatever they might find. Ben asked one of the women if she'd seen Madam Sing, but she merely shook her head in silence.

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"You might have better luck than me," he told Chin Loo. "Can't you talk to some of these people?"

"There is a girl from the house!" she said suddenly, pointing toward a slender young Chinese woman perhaps a few years older than herself. "Yau!" she called out, handing Ben the reins of her horse and running over to intercept the woman.

"Chin Loo, you are safe!" Yau greeted her. "I feared you might be dead with the others."

"Have you seen Madam Sing?"

"She was here, looking through the ruins of her house. Someone from the mine came in a carriage and she went with him."

"What mine is that?" Ben asked.

"There is a small gold mine outside of town, run by a man named Lassiter. He was a frequent visitor to Madam Sing's house."

"Do you know the way to his place?" he asked Chin Loo.

She hesitated, then nodded. "I went there once with Madam Sing."

"Come. I will take you there and perhaps she will make arrangements for you."

"Could I not stay with you?" she asked.

"You would not be safe traveling with me across California right now. I must work to make a living, and you would be alone much of the time in unfriendly surroundings. You belong with your own people. They can protect you."

She said no more, but led the way out of town, not toward the river but south toward the hills. They did not ride far, and presently they came upon signs of Lassiter's modest mining operation. Leaving their horses at a convenient hitching post, they walked toward a ranch house not far from the mine's entrance in the hillside.

The door opened before they reached it and a cowhand greeted them with a rifle held loosely in his right hand, pointed at the ground. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"We're looking for Madam Sing," Ben replied. "We were told she's here."

"Your name?"

"I'm Ben Snow. This is Chin Loo. She works for Madam Sing."

"Wait here," the man said and retreated inside.

"He needs armed guards?" Ben asked the girl.

"For the gold. Sometimes bandits try to steal it."

The guard returned in a moment and ushered them inside. A middle-aged Chinese woman was seated on the sofa. She rose as soon as she saw Chin Loo. "My dear girl, I feared they had killed you." She wore a beaded silk *qipao* with turquoise bracelets on each wrist. Her lips were blood-red to match her pointed fingernails, and her braided black hair was twirled into an elaborate series of loops. She opened her arms to receive Chin Loo and then shifted her gaze to Ben. "Who are you? I like your red vest."

"I'm Ben Snow. I was riding through town and I saw Chin Loo

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fleeing from gunmen who were burning Chinatown. I learned that many of them were sheriff's deputies."

Madam Sing nodded. "They want all Chinese out. Our men came here for gold, and to build a railroad, but now there are too many of us and they want us to leave."

Ben glanced around at the room. The place was decidedly masculine, with its mounted animal heads and rifle rack, but seemed adequate as temporary quarters for the women. Certainly the armed guard would be some protection against Knight and his deputies.

He was preparing to depart when a muscular white-haired man entered the house. "I'm Russell Lassiter," he said, shaking hands with Ben. "What brings you here?"

Ben introduced himself and repeated the story about rescuing Chin Loo from the sheriff's men. "I'll be on my way now."

"At least stay for supper," he insisted. "We owe you something for rescuing this young lady."

Ben hesitated only a moment. It was already too late in the day for him to reach Sacramento and after days on the trail he felt the need of a good meal. "I thank you for your hospitality."

Russell Lassiter proved to be the perfect host, starting out with Roman Punch, made with lemons, oranges, and Champagne, followed by Chicken Chartreuse. For dessert there was a delicious hickory-nut cake. The rich-looking silverware had bone-china handles sporting a fancy "L" crest. Lassiter informed them with pride that his cook had come from one of San Francisco's leading hotels. When Madam Sing praised the meal too, Lassiter called for the cook to meet his guests.

Charlie Chow was a short, round man in his thirties who seemed to wear a perpetual grin. He'd been born in San Francisco of Chinese parents who'd taught him the fundamentals of cooking. He'd been working in one of the city's leading hotels when Russell Lassiter discovered him and brought him out to the mine. "I only have a dozen men working here," he explained, "but they need to be fed. Charlie is my man for that."

The cook's grin grew even wider. "It is a pleasure to serve you."

"Do you ever serve local game?" Ben asked, thinking of the afternoon kills that often made up his meals on the trail.

Charlie Chow nodded. "I prepare excellent rabbit terrine, and fried venison, of course." He added, with a chuckle, "No bear."

Ben hadn't enjoyed such a fine meal in a long time, if ever. After another glass of champagne he didn't argue with Lassiter's suggestion that he spend the night. There was no wife in evidence, which didn't surprise Ben. Chin Loo had told him the mine owner was a frequent visitor at Madam Sing's house.

Shortly after ten o'clock, as they were preparing to retire, Lassiter's foreman came to the door. He was a brawny man named Steve Sutter who seemed concerned about something at the mine. "Water's seeping in," he told Lassiter. "I've had to pull the men out."

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The mine owner shook his head. "It's that underground stream again. When the river is high we always get it, even though we're miles away." This last seemed offered for his guests' information. "We'll have to shut down operations until the water recedes."

He invited Sutter to stay for a drink and the man was willing enough. Ben stayed with them for a time. "We've got to do something about this mine," the foreman told Lassiter. "You've got a dozen men working in there and we come up with a couple of tiny nuggets in a week's time. There's no profit in that."

"You think the mine's played out?"

"Seems like it to me."

"Where is it?" Ben asked. "Below ground or in the side of that hill?"

Steve Sutter answered. "Too expensive to go much below ground. When we started mining the hill a couple of years back we hoped we'd strike a mother lode. But it looks like all we're finding are nuggets carried along by that stream when it floods."

"Then the water isn't all bad."

"It's bad when it prevents our working the mine," Lassiter said. Then, to Sutter, "Let's see how it is in the morning."

The foreman nodded and retreated to the bunkhouse. Lassiter showed Ben to his second-floor room at the front of the house. It was small but faced toward an open field with an excellent view of the full moon. Madam Sing and Chin Loo had followed them upstairs and Ben expected they'd be sharing a room. But Madam Sing was assigned a room of her own next to Lassiter's master bedroom at the rear of the house, while the younger woman was offered only a sleeping bag in the downstairs pantry. She seemed quite content with the arrangement and followed the mine owner back downstairs.

Ben shut his door and turned down the lamp until it went off. He was about to undress and slip under the covers of the comfortable bed when something outside the window caught his attention. A single rider on horseback was slowly making his way across the field toward the house. Once, when he twisted in the saddle as if to make certain he wasn't followed, Ben caught a glint of moonlight on his chest. Something shiny, a badge. He realized that the man on horseback was Sheriff Wally Knight.

Ben slipped his gun from its holster and sat by the window in the dark, prepared to use the weapon if Knight tried to enter the house. Sometime later, drowsy and half asleep, he saw the horseman retreating toward the distant woods. He decided to make a quick tour of the house to make certain the sheriff had done no harm. He strapped on his gun belt and stepped into the darkened hall.

Opening Madam Sing's door just a crack, he could hear her gentle snoring. Lassiter was in his room, too, and downstairs he found Chin Loo curled up in her sleeping bag. The house's doors were tightly locked. He opened the one at the front and started across to the bunkhouse. He saw something white on the ground in the dis-

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tance and drew his pistol.

It was a body, covered in blood and barely moving. He holstered his weapon and dropped to his knees beside the man, realizing now that it was the cook, Charlie Chow.

"Charlie! Can you hear me?"

The head moved slightly. "Madam Sing . . . gold . . ."

Then he was dead.

Ben Snow roused the men in the bunkhouse first, calling Steve Sutter's name. The foreman lit his lantern and came forward, bleary-eyed in his long underwear. On the bunkhouse table Ben could see the remains of the hickory-nut cake that had been the evening's dessert. "What's up?"

"Your cook, Charlie Chow, has been killed. I think he was stabbed in the chest."

Sutter and some of the other miners followed Ben back outside. "Who would kill Charlie?" the foreman asked. "He didn't have an enemy in the world."

"They're killing Chinese in town," Ben reminded him.

"But not here."

For the moment Ben said nothing about sighting Sheriff Knight riding across the field. "I'd better rouse the others," he said, heading back to the house.

Lassiter was already up, standing at the top of the stairs. "What is it? I heard voices and saw the men out my window."

"Your cook has been killed. It looks like he was stabbed."

Chin Loo had been awakened by the voices and come out of the pantry. "Who is stabbed?" she asked, terror written across her face. "Are they coming to kill us?"

"Not if I can help it," Ben told her.

There was no point in rousing Madam Sing, so he followed Lassiter out the door and across the yard toward the bunkhouse. The circle of miners around Chow's body parted as the owner approached. He bent down for a moment and then straightened up. "Did any of you see or hear anything?" he asked his men. Ben remained silent.

"We were all asleep," Sutter answered. "Didn't hear a thing until Snow here found the body and woke us up."

Lassiter turned to Ben. "What brought you outside?

"I couldn't sleep and thought I saw some movement down here. I went down to take a look."

"Who did you think it might be? Injuns?"

"I was afraid the sheriff's men might have followed us from town."

"Knight wouldn't bother anyone staying with me. Besides, Charlie was an American, born in Frisco."

"Could one of your miners have killed him?"

The mine owner shook his head. "I can't see why. Everyone liked him. I don't know where I'll ever find a cook as good as Charlie."

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Though sunrise was still some time off, the eastern sky was beginning to brighten. Glancing around on the ground near the body, Ben saw a bloody knife a few feet away. "That looks like the murder weapon," he said.

Lassiter peered closer. "It's one of my knives from the kitchen."

And indeed it was. Ben could make out the crested "L" on the bone-china handle. Before he could comment, they saw Madam Sing coming off the porch and walking toward them. She was wearing the same beaded silk *qipao* she'd had on at dinner, with a bright red sash holding it closed. It occurred to him that it might be the only garment she had after fleeing her house in the town.

"What is happening here?" she asked Chin Loo, and when the Chinese girl did not immediately reply she addressed her question to Russell Lassiter.

"Someone killed Charlie," he answered simply.

"Your cook?" She came a little closer, then turned away with her hand to her mouth.

Steve Sutter, the foreman, was shaking his head. "It wasn't any of my men. We were all in the bunkhouse."

"Come on," Lassiter told the women. "I'll take you back."

"Let me," Ben said, taking Madam Sing by the arm, moving away from the others. "I must talk to you," he whispered.

"What do you want? Chin Loo?"

"Just to ask you some questions, nothing more."

Her veiled eyes studied him as the first rays of the sun broke the horizon. "It's not free at Madam Sing's even if my house did get burned down."

"Charlie Chow lived for just a few seconds after I found him. He muttered something about Madam Sing and gold."

"Do you think I killed him?" she asked, her eyes never leaving his face. He thought about the knife she might have hidden in her sleeve.

"I'm wondering about the gold."

"No gold. Madam Sing has no gold."

"But Russell Lassiter has a whole mine of it. Perhaps that is what Charlie meant. Perhaps you came here for Lassiter's gold."

"His mine is worked out. There is no gold here."

"Then why does he keep a dozen men on?"

"I do not know. I flee from town when the sheriff comes to kill the Chinese, burn our buildings. Lassiter is a good customer so I come here to hide. He will protect me."

He walked her back to the house. "Try to get some sleep. It's still early."

Ben waited until after breakfast to speak with Steve Sutter again. The foreman and his men were preparing to enter the mine when Ben asked if he might accompany them.

Sutter eyed him uncertainly. "There's nothing to see, just that underground stream where we try to recover an occasional nugget."

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"I'm just interested in how you do it."

"Come along, then," the foreman said. "The water's down a bit today but you'll find it pretty boring." He handed Ben a lantern.

And Sutter was right. Ben followed the men down a twisty tunnel, hearing the gurgle of running water not far ahead. When he arrived at the stream, lit by the flickering light of a dozen lanterns, there was nothing to observe but the boring sight of a dozen men with wide, shallow pans to catch the sand and gravel washed along by the stream, in hopes of finding a bit of gold. Ben watched them for about ten minutes without noting any signs of success.

"You've convinced me," Ben told Sutter with a smile. "I thought with a name like that you'd be an expert at gold mining."

"No relation to John Sutter," he replied with regret. "Sutter's Mill was on the American River, which flows into the Sacramento River."

"Does this stream run into the San Joaquin?"

Sutter gave a little snort. "Actually it runs from the San Joaquin. It's part of the Sacramento-San Joaquin river delta, a rare group of natural and man-made channels that flow from the river and elsewhere, converging further downstream."

Ben grunted. "There's always something new to learn."

He took his lantern and returned to the entrance.

Later that morning Chin Loo sought him out. "Will you be leaving soon?" she asked.

"I expect so."

"Would you take me with you?"

He smiled down at the girl. She'd claimed to be almost twenty but she appeared little more than a child. "I travel alone," he told her, not unkindly. "It's not a life for you."

"Anything would be better than here."

"Madam Sing—"

"Sometimes she makes me come with her, to see men. She wants me to be one of her girls. She sits in her parlor smoking her opium pipe and tells me I am attractive to men."

"She won't be sitting in her parlor anymore. The house is gone."

"And the Chinese are being killed! Why? Why do they hate us?"

Ben had no answer, and perhaps too many answers. Because you are different, he might have said. Because your language and customs are different. Because there are not enough Indians for them to kill. Because there is too much hatred in the world.

Instead he said, "I'm riding into town this afternoon. You can come with me. Perhaps we can find someone who'll take you in."

"All right," she said, a bit shyly. "I will feel safe with you."

"I want to speak again with the foreman, then we'll get moving."

He found Sutter standing near the mine entrance, smoking a cigarette. "Tell me about last night," he said.

"What about it? I told you what little we knew."

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"Not everything. Charlie came to the bunkhouse and then returned to the kitchen, didn't he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You said you were all asleep, but you weren't. I saw the remains of that hickory-nut cake on the bunkhouse table. Charlie brought it to you after dinner, only he forgot to bring a knife to cut it. He went out to get a knife from the kitchen and never came back."

Sutter was silent for a moment and then he nodded. "I had a hunting knife but he said the blade was dirty. He left to get a clean one and we never saw him again. We figured the boss had caught him and he went to bed."

"You didn't go looking for him?"

"I went out for a minute, but it was dark and I couldn't see him anywhere."

"There was a moon."

"I guess it was behind a cloud then."

"Did you see anything of a horseman?"

"No. Was there one?"

"I thought I saw somebody," Ben answered vaguely.

He left Sutter with his cigarette and returned to Chin Loo. "Were you comfortable on the horse you had?" he asked.

"Yes, yes. It is fine."

"Then we'll ride into town. There must be someone who'll take you in."

They rode in silence for a time, until the town came into view. A thin pall of smoke still hung over the Chinatown section, mute reminder of what had happened there. On the outskirts a few faces turned their way, perhaps surprised to see the Chinese girl returning. In Chinatown, oddly, men were already clearing away the charred timbers and starting to dig holes.

They stopped at the general store and Ben took Chin Loo inside. A stocky middle-aged woman stood behind the counter. "Can I help you?" she asked, keeping a careful eye on Chin Loo to guard against shoplifting.

"I hope so," Ben replied. "My friend here needs a place to stay. She was burned out of her house."

The woman snorted. "She's one of Madam Sing's whores. She's lucky she's not dead like the rest of them. No one would take her in."

Chin Loo made a sobbing noise at the words. "I am not—"

"Get out of here before I call for the sheriff," the woman warned.

Ben tried to continue the conversation but Chin Loo tugged at his sleeve. "We go," she told him, starting for the door.

Outside, he put his arm around her, "I'm sorry. I didn't think it would be like this. Maybe someone else—"

"No, I cannot stay here!"

He knew she was right. The town was no place for Chinese, at least as long as Wally Knight was the sheriff. They had mounted

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their horses and turned back the way they had come when a voice barked an order. "Stay right there! You ain't goin' nowhere."

Ben wheeled around in his saddle and saw the sheriff approaching on foot, a carbine held steady in his hands. "You're just the man I wanted to see," Ben told him. "I want to ask you about the killing of Charlie Chow out at the Lassiter mine last night."

"What's that, son? I'm the sheriff here. I ask the questions. What you doin' still hanging around with that Chink?"

He raised the carbine with one finger on the trigger and Ben's hand went for his gun. Both weapons fired at the same instant and Sheriff Knight went down. Ben felt a surge of exhilaration before he realized that Chin Loo had slid off her horse.

She died in his arms, but the people who came running cared little about that. He had killed Sheriff Knight and he would hang for it. Ben fought off a couple of men, punching one in the nose, then leapt onto Oats and headed out of town. Only then were a couple of shots fired after him, but he was already out of range. A posse would be coming for him, of course, and his chances of outrunning it were slim. He was sorry now that he'd ever stopped in this little town where the sheriff killed Chinese women and men, where the mine's golden stream ran backwards and the—

Backwards.

The stream didn't flow toward the town and the river, but back from them, into a delta area. He remembered the men working among the ruins of Madam Sing's house. Perhaps Sheriff Knight hadn't ridden out to the mine to kill Charlie Chow. Perhaps he'd had another reason.

Ben turned his horse toward the trail that led back to the Lassiter mine. Russell Lassiter was just coming out of the mine as he rode across the field. "You're back," he said, seeming a bit surprised. "Where's the girl?"

"She's dead. Sheriff Knight shot her."

"Yeah, the sheriff doesn't think much of Chinese. That's too bad."

Ben dismounted and faced the mine owner. "I was on my way out of town when I had a thought. It was about that stream. You have a dozen men back there sifting the sludge in the remote chance of finding a nugget. That seemed like a waste of money to me until I got thinking about that backward stream. The nuggets you've been finding are coming from somewhere between the river and here. Could the source be the town— under the town?"

"I don't know anything about it," Lassiter insisted.

"Could you be keeping your men on because you knew there'd be more work for them soon? After Sheriff Knight killed the Chinese and burnt down Chinatown?"

"Are you accusing me of something?" he asked, his face red with anger.

"I saw Sheriff Knight ride up to the house last night. He was

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coming to report to you that Chinatown was destroyed and his men were clearing away the ruins for you. Only in the darkness Charlie Chow overheard your conversation. He'd gone back to the house to borrow a knife for the cake he'd brought the men. He heard the conversation and confronted you after the sheriff rode away. These were his people the sheriff had killed."

"Sheriff Knight would think you insane for suggesting such a thing."

"Sheriff Knight is dead," Ben told him, and the fury drained out of the man's face.

"What do you mean?"

Ben continued talking. "You said you saw the men gathered around Charlie's body from the window in your room, but your bedroom is at the back of the house, not the front. And I tried to picture the confrontation between Charlie and his killer. Could it have been Sheriff Knight? When faced with the man who'd killed Chinese and burned down Chinatown, would Charlie have handed over the sharp knife he held in his hand, even at gunpoint? Of course not! He would have used it to defend himself. And the knife was valuable to the household, no doubt part of a set. Would Charlie have turned it over to anyone? Yes, one person—you, Lassiter, because after all, the knife belonged to you."

"Are you saying I—?"

"You wouldn't have been wearing your gun belt for a post-midnight meeting with Sheriff Knight in your front yard. When the sheriff left and Charlie accosted you, he had the knife in his hand. You demanded it, and when he gave it to you he got it back in the chest. Charlie's dying words to me were about Madam Sing and gold. He meant the gold beneath her sporting house back in town, the gold that wiped out all of Chinatown."

That was when Lassiter went for his gun. The barrel of Ben's own pistol came down on his wrist and Lassiter cursed, dropping his weapon. "Hear that sound?" he asked with a snarl of pain. "Horses' hooves. They're coming for you."

Ben knocked him unconscious with a blow to the side of the head, then stripped off his red plaid vest and slipped it over Lassiter's arms and shoulders. The man's hat had fallen to the ground, but Ben retrieved it and placed it on his head, pulling down the wide brim to conceal more of his face. He propped Lassiter up, one arm strapped to the hitching post, and hurried to his horse.

The galloping horses were drawing closer as Ben rounded the house, seeing Madam Sing in the window of her bedroom. "Stay inside!" he shouted to her, and then he heard the burst of gunfire from the front. The posse had arrived to kill Ben Snow.

He rode off to the east, hoping he could get far enough away before they realized their error. He was sorry he'd had to leave his new vest behind. ●

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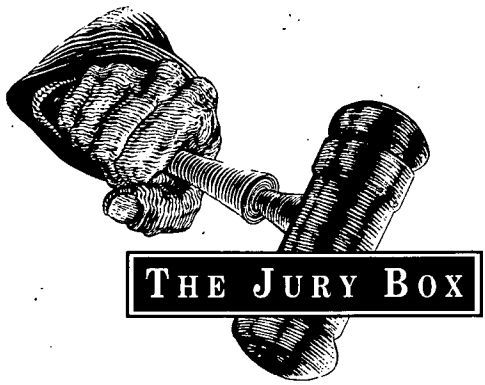

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Next to horse racing, the favorite sport of hardboiled fiction writers is boxing. The first three collections in our annual short-story round-up are highlighted by tales of the ring.

**** James Lee Burke: *Jesus Out to Sea*, Simon & Schuster, $14. Eleven stories, originally published in *Esquire* and various literary magazines, suggest that, for all his success as a novelist, Burke's lyrically written treatises on good and evil work even better shorter. Among the most impressive are 1940s historicals, including "Texas City, 1947" (a stand-alone excerpt from his 1992 novel *A Stained White Radiance*) and the youth boxing tale "The Molester," but the title tale is a harrowing account of New Orleans during Katrina.

**** Joyce Carol Oates: *The Museum of Dr. Moses: Tales of Mystery and Suspense*, Harcourt, $24. The title story is an eerie gothic gem, but the real highlight is the painfully realistic boxing saga "The Man Who Fought Roland LaStarza." Ten consistently compelling stories include two from *EQMM* and one from *AHMM*.

*** Max Brand: *Masquerade: Ten Crime Stories*, edited by William F. Nolan, Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper. The poetic pulpster Brand could handle any popular-fiction genre, and this grouping—dated from 1935 to 1938, sources divided evenly between pulps and slicks—ranges from ironic crime stories to espionage to pure detection to expert evocations of boxing and racing.

*** Joel Townsley Rogers: *Killing Time and Other Stories*, with introduction and afterword by Alfred Jan, Ramble House, $28 hardcover, $18 trade paper. Six longish pulp stories, dating from 1934 to 1947, represent an undervalued writer. The title story, about a disabled World War II veteran trying to break into mystery writing, offers affectionate parody and fair-play detection, while the magazine version of the classic *The Red Right Hand*

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captures its offbeat flavor only slightly less effectively than at full length. The outré plots often involve coincidence, though not to the fantastical extent of Harry Stephen Keeler, whose complete works are offered by Ramble. (An indispensable companion is the earlier Rogers collection *Night of Horror and Other Stories* [Ramble House, $30 hardcover, $18 trade paper], including the much-anthologized minor classic "The Murderer" and a Rogers bibliography compiled by son Tom Rogers, expanded by Francis M. Nevins.)

*** Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini: *Crucifixion River: Western Stories,* Five Star, $25.95. Ross Macdonald and Margaret Millar never having shared a byline, the joint efforts of Muller and Pronzini are the only collaborations of two MWA Grand Masters, married or not. Each contributes three solo, bookended by two together, including the previously unpublished title novella, a suspenseful and intricately constructed western *Grand Hotel* set at a ferry stop where travelers wait out a storm. Four first appeared in *EQMM*.

*** William F. Nolan: *Nightshadows*, Darkwood, $17.99. The reliably readable Nolan is equally at home in multiple genres. Though labeled horror and dark fantasy, this collection of 23 recent stories also offers science fiction, straight crime, unconventional private eyes, and a concluding film-treatment-style novella speculating on a time-traveling Jack the Ripper.

*** Walter Satterthwait: *The Mankiller of Poojegai and Other Stories*, Crippen & Landru, $43 limited hardcover, $17 trade paper. An unfailingly entertaining writer tweaks genre conventions in eleven stories, seven from *AHMM*, one repeated from his 1995 collection *The Gold of Mayani*. Backgrounds range from Africa to Greece, Santa Fe to Paris. "Connection Terminated" recalls Lucille Fletcher's classic radio play "Sorry, Wrong Number," and other stories evoke EC comics, *Casablanca*, Stanley Ellin's "The Specialty of the House," and every private eye who was ever hit over the head. The purely comic entries—two stone-age historicals and a send-up of Agatha Christie—are the least impressive.

*** Donald J. Sobol: *Encyclopedia Brown Cracks the Case*, illustrated by James Bernardin, Dutton, $15.99. The boy detective who debuted in 1963 returns for the first time in a quarter century in ten simply written, fairly plotted, sneakily educational tales of neighborhood mystery for children eight and up.

Cornell Woolrich's *Love and Night* (Dennis McMillan, $35; quarter-morocco bound, slip-cased limited $250) consists of previously uncollected jazz-age romances influenced by F. Scott Fitzgerald, but as editor Francis M. Nevins points out, plenty of elements foreshadow the author's later suspense masterpieces, and at least two (the trickily plotted "Clip-Joint" and

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the wistfully ironic "No Kick Coming") are indisputably criminous. The first of a projected 20-volume reprinting of the master's stories is indispensable to any serious collector, and the quarter-morocco bound limited edition is a beauty.

A sampling of Joe Hill's *20th Century Ghosts* (Morrow, $24.95) reveals an immensely talented writer of horror, fantasy, and dark suspense, reminiscent of such masters as Ray Bradbury, Jack Finney, Charles Beaumont, and Stephen King.

All five nominees for the best-short-story-of-2007 Edgar, not a detective story in the lot, appeared in original anthologies. Best of them (not necessarily the winner) is Laura Lippmann's "Hardly Knew Her" in Otto Penzler's poker-themed *Dead Man's Hand* (Harcourt, $25). Stuart M. Kaminsky's "Blue Note," in *Chicago Blues* (Bleak House, $27.95 hardcover, $15.95 trade paper), edited by Libby Fischer Hellmann, is solidly professional and more truly a poker story. Mark Ammons's well-written and engaging "The Catch," from *Still Waters: Crime Stories by New England Writers* (Level Best, $15), edited by Kate Flora, Ruth McCarty, and Susan Oleksiw, is not really a crime or mystery story. Daniel Woodrell's "Uncle," in *A Hell of a Woman: An Anthology of Female Noir* (Busted Flush, $26 hardcover, $16 trade paper), edited by Megan Abbot, is dark and grim as they come. Least impressive is Susan Straight's "The Golden Gopher," in *Los Angeles Noir* (Akashic, $15.95), edited by Denise Hamilton.

Fans of the late Edward D. Hoch will find new stories with the *EQMM* master's signature meticulous construction in two recent anthologies: "Christmas Crossing" in the Crime Writers of Canada's *Blood on the Holly* (Baskerville, $16.95), edited by Caro Soles, and "Friday Night Luck" in the Mystery Writers of America's *The Blue Religion* (Little, Brown, $24.95 hardcover, $15.99 trade paper), edited by Michael Connelly.

In addition to book reviews and interviews with writers of legal mysteries and thrillers, Stephen M. Murphy's *What if Holden Caulfield Went to Law School?: Selected Legal Fiction and Nonfiction* (Lawyers Writing, $17.95) includes four short stories, the best of which is "Have Gavel, Will Travel," about a judge-for-hire's ethically questionable mediation in a sexual harassment case. Most provocative and ambiguous is "Honky," in which a lawyer who specializes in discrimination cases makes a grand gesture I found foolish, unnecessary, and insensitive to his family. I wonder what others think and what the author intended us to think.

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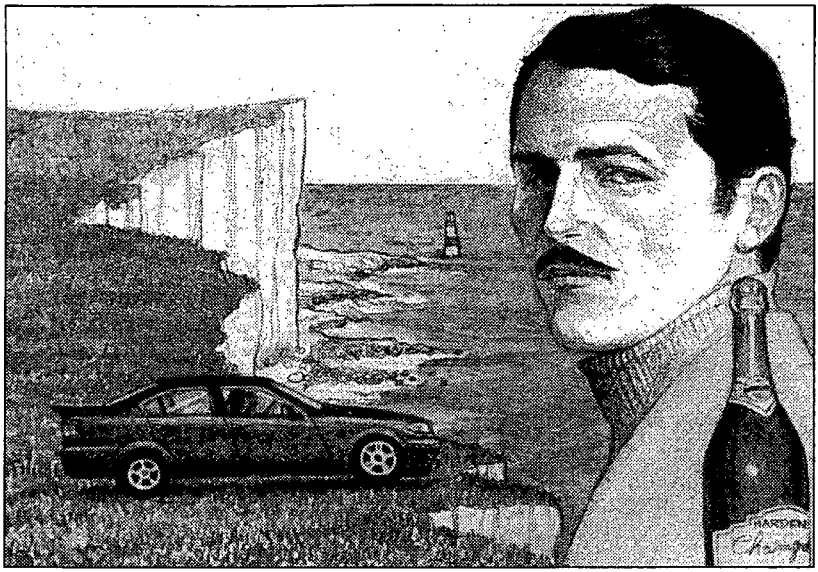

Art by Laurie Harden

A Blow on the Head

by Peter Lovesey

Almost there. Donna Culpepper looked ahead to her destination and her destiny, the top of Beachy Head, the great chalk headland that is the summit of the South Downs coast. She'd walked from where the taxi driver had left her. The stiff climb wasn't easy on this gusty August afternoon, but her mind was made up. She was thirty-nine, with no intention of being forty. She'd made a disastrous marriage to a man who had deserted her after six weeks, robbed her of her money, her confidence, her dreams. Trying to put it all behind her, as friends kept urging, had not worked. Two years on, she was unwilling to try any longer.

Other ways of ending it, like an overdose or cutting her wrists, were not right for Donna. Beachy Head was the place. As a child she'd stayed in Eastbourne with her gran and they came here often, "for a blow on the Head" as Gran put it, crunching the tiny grey shells of the path, her grey hair tugged by the wind, while jackdaws and herring gulls swooped and soared, screaming in the clear air. From the top, five hundred feet up when you first saw the sea, you had a sudden sensation of height that made your spine tingle. There was just the rim of eroding turf and the hideous drop.

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On a good day you could see the Isle of Wight, Gran had said. Donna couldn't see anything and stepped closer to the edge and Gran grabbed her and said it was dangerous. People came here to kill themselves.

This interested Donna. Gran gave reluctant answers to her questions.

"They jump off."

"Why?"

"I don't know, dear."

"Yes, you do. Tell me, Gran."

"Some people are unhappy."

"What makes them unhappy?"

"Lots of things."

"What things?"

"Never mind, dear."

"But I do mind. Tell me what made those people unhappy."

"Grown-up things."

"Like making babies?"

"No, no, no. Whoever put such ideas in your head?"

"What, then?"

"Sometimes they get unhappy because they lose the person they love."

"What's love?"

"Oh, dear. You've such a lot to learn. When you grow up you fall in love with someone and if you're lucky, you marry them."

"Is that why they jump off the cliff?"

Gran laughed. "No, you daft ha'porth, it's the opposite, or I think it is. Let's change the subject."

The trouble with grownups is that they always change the subject before they get to the point. For some years after this Donna thought falling in love was a physical act involving gravity. She could see that falling off Beachy Head was dangerous and would only be attempted by desperate people. She expected it was possible to get in love by falling from more sensible heights. She tried jumping off her bed a few times, but nothing happened. The kitchen table, which she tried only once, was no use either.

She started getting sensuous dreams, though. She would leap off the cliff edge and float in the air like the skydivers she'd seen on television. If that was falling in love she could understand why there was so much talk about it.

Disillusion set in when she started school. Love turned out to be something else involving those gross, ungainly creatures, boys.

Reviewing Peter Lovesey's new novel *The Headhunters* (Soho, April 2008), *Publishers Weekly* said, "The CWA Diamond Dagger winner has no peer in presenting a traditional mystery, with all the clues hiding in plain sight." Mr. Lovesey also has no peer at the "twist in the tail" mystery short story. He is a past *EQMM* Readers Award recipient, winner of the MWA's Golden Anniversary short story contest, and has earned many other short-story honors, including the 2007 CWA short story prize. †

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After a few skirmishes with overcurious boys she decided love was not worth pursuing any longer. It didn't come up to her dreams. This was a pity because other girls of her age expected less and got a more gradual initiation into the mysteries of sex.

At seventeen, the hormones would not be suppressed and Donna drank five vodkas and went to bed with a man of twenty-three. He said he was in love with her, but if that was love it was unsatisfactory. And in the several relationships she had in her twenties she never experienced anything to match those dreams of falling and flying. Most of her girlfriends found partners and moved in with them. Donna held off.

In her mid-to-late thirties she began to feel deprived. One day she saw the Meeting Place page in a national paper. Somewhere out there was her ideal partner. She decided to take active steps to find him. She had money. Her gran had died and left her everything, ninety thousand pounds. In the ad she described herself as independent, sensitive, and cultured.

And that was how she met Lionel Culpepper.

He was charming, good-looking, and better at sex than anyone she'd met. She told him about her gran and her walks on Beachy Head and her dreams of flying. He said he had a pilot's licence and offered to take her up in a small plane. She asked if he owned a plane and he said he would hire one. Thinking of her legacy, she asked how much they cost and he thought he could buy a good one secondhand for ninety thousand pounds. They got married and opened a joint account. He went off one morning to look at a plane offered for sale in a magazine. That was the last she saw of her husband. When she checked the bank account it was empty. She had been married thirty-eight days.

For a long time she worried about Lionel, thinking he'd had an accident. She reported him missing. Then a letter arrived from a solicitor. Cruelly formal in its wording, it stated that her husband, Lionel Culpepper, wanted a divorce. She was devastated. She hated him then and knew him for what he was. He would not get his divorce that easily.

That was two years ago. Here she was, taking the route of so many who have sought to end their troubles by suicide. Some odd sense of completion, she supposed, was making her take those last steps to the highest point. Any part of the cliff edge would do.

She saw a phone box ahead. Oddly situated, you would think, on a cliff top. The Samaritans had arranged for the phone to be here just in case any tormented soul decided to call them and talk. Donna walked past. A short way beyond was a well-placed wooden bench and she was grateful for that. She needed a moment to compose herself.

She sat. It was just the usual seat you found in parks and along riverbanks all over the country. Not comfortable for long with its

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slatted seat and upright back, but welcome at the end of the stiff climb. And it did face the sea.

In a moment she would launch herself. She wasn't too scared. A small part of her still wanted the thrill of falling. For a few precious seconds she would be like those skydivers appearing to fly. This was the way to go.

Revived and resolute, Donna stood and checked to make sure no one was about. Perfect. She had the whole headland to herself.

Well, then.

What it was that drew her attention back to the bench she couldn't say. At the edge of her vision she became aware of a small brass plaque screwed to the top rail. She read the inscription.

> In memory of my beloved wife Donna Maria Culpepper
> 1967–2006
> who loved to walk here and enjoy this view.

A surreal moment. Donna swayed and had to reach out and clutch the bench. She sat again, rubbed her eyes, took a deep breath, and looked a second time, because she half wondered if her heightened state of mind had made her hallucinate.

The words were just as she'd first read them. Her name in full. She'd never met anyone with the same name. It would be extraordinary if some other Donna Maria Culpepper had walked here and loved this view. The year of birth was right as well.

Two things were definitely not Donna. She hadn't died in 2006 and the way her rat of a husband had treated her made the word "beloved" a sick joke.

Was it possible, she asked herself now, still staring at the weird plaque, that Lionel had paid for the bench and put it here? Could he have heard from some mistaken source that she had died? Had he done this in a fit of conscience?

No chance. Freed of that foolish infatuation she'd experienced when she met the man and married him, she knew him for what he was. Conscience didn't trouble Lionel. He'd had the gall to ask for a divorce—through a solicitor and after weeks of silence. He was cowardly and callous.

How could this bench be anything to do with Lionel, or with her?

It was a mystery.

Cold logic suggested there had been another Donna Maria Culpepper born in the same year who had died in 2006 and had this touching memorial placed here by her widowed husband, who was obviously more devoted and considerate than Lionel. And yet it required a series of coincidences for this to have happened: the same first names, surname, date of birth.

She took another look. In the bottom right corner of the plaque was a detail she hadn't noticed—the letters "L. C."—Lionel's ini-

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tials. This, surely, clinched it. The odds against were huge.

She no longer felt suicidal. Anger had taken over. She was outraged by Lionel's conduct. He shouldn't have done this. She had come here in a wholly negative frame of mind. Now a new challenge galvanized her. She would get to the truth. She was recharged, determined to find an explanation.

First she had to find him. After their breakup she'd had minimal contact, and that was through solicitors' letters. She had no idea where he lived now.

She walked down the path towards the town.

The Parks and Recreation Department at Eastbourne Council said that about forty seats had been donated as memorials by members of the public. A helpful young woman showed her the records. The bench had been presented last spring. A man had come in with the plaque already inscribed. He'd particularly asked for a teak seat to be positioned at the top of Beachy Head. He'd paid in cash and left no name, though it was obvious he had to be a Mr. Culpepper.

Donna asked if he'd left his address or phone number and was told he had not. She took a sharp, impatient breath and explained about the shock she'd had. The clerical assistant was sympathetic and said it could only be an unfortunate duplication of names.

While Donna was explaining why she thought it couldn't be coincidence, an assistant at the next desk asked if they were talking about the seat at the top of Beachy Head. She said a few months ago she'd had someone else in, a woman, asking about the same seat and the man who presented it.

"A woman? Did she say why?" Donna asked.

"No, but she left her business card. I put it in the folder, just in case we found out any more."

The card had slipped to the bottom of the folder. Donna was given a pencil and paper to make a note of the name and phone number. *Maggie Boswell-Jones, Starpart Film, TV, and Theatrical Agency, Cecil Court, Off Charing Cross Road, London.* There were phone and fax numbers, and an e-mail address.

Donna didn't have her mobile with her. She hadn't intended using it on this last day of her life. She used a public phone downstairs.

The conversation was all very bizarre.

"You're Lionel's wife? But you're dead," Maggie Boswell-Jones said. "You were killed in a flying accident."

"I promise you I wasn't," Donna said. "I'm who I say I am."

"How can you be? There's a seat on Beachy Head with your name on it. Lionel put it there in your memory."

"He ran out on me in the second month of our marriage. May I ask why you were looking for him?"

"Because he's my boyfriend, darling, and he's missing."

Donna felt as if she'd been kicked in the stomach. She knew Lionel was a rat. Now she knew he was a two-timing rat. He'd

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walked out on her and started up with this woman. She made an effort to save her fury for Lionel.

"How did you know about the seat?"

"He took me up there specially. He wanted me to know that you were dead. I made it very clear to him that I don't get involved with married guys. He spoke nicely of you."

"Look, can I come and see you?"

"Is that necessary?"

"I'm determined to find him. With your help I'm sure I can do it."

At the agency Donna recognised a man who stepped out of the lift. He was an actor she often saw in *Coronation Street*. In the waiting room upstairs there were framed movie posters. In a glass showcase were various awards, including what looked like an Oscar.

Maggie appeared high-powered with her black fringe, tinted glasses, and purple suit, but she turned out to be charming. Coffee and biscuits were ready on a low table in her office. They sat together on a black leather sofa. "I've been trying to understand what's going on with Lionel ever since you phoned and I'm still at a loss," Maggie said. "He's such a bright guy. I can't think how he got to believe you'd passed away."

"He made it up," Donna said.

"Oh, I don't think so. He said the kindest things about you. I mean, why would he go to the trouble and expense of buying a seat for you?"

"To fool you into believing I was dead and he was free to have an affair. Can't you see that?"

Maggie took a lot of convincing. Clearly she was still under Lionel's spell. Just as Donna had believed him incapable of leaving her, so Maggie insisted he must have lost his memory in the flying accident.

"There was no flying accident," Donna said. "He talked about taking me in a plane, but it never happened. He took ninety thousand pounds from our account."

"Really? This shocks me." The colour had drained from Maggie's face. "I certainly need to find him because I lent him sixty grand to renovate a house he'd bought for us in the south of France."

"You'll never see that money again," Donna said. "He's a con man. He befriends women like you and me and fleeces them. If you don't mind me asking, how did you meet him? Was it through a newspaper?"

"What a skunk!" Maggie said, and Donna knew she'd got through to her at last.

That evening Maggie took Donna for a meal at a restaurant near the agency. "I'm not short of a bob or two," she said, 'but let's admit it, I'm unattached and on the lookout. I meet plenty of hunky blokes in my job, but it doesn't do to mix work and pleasure, so I put my ad in the *Guardian*. Lionel was the best of the bunch who responded—or seemed to be."

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"I wonder how many other women he's conned," Donna said. "It really upsets me that he went to all that trouble to make out I was dead and he was a free man. There must be some way of stopping him."

"We can't stop him if we can't find him."

'Couldn't we trace him through the newspaper?"

"I don't think so. They're very strict about box numbers. And they cover themselves by saying you indemnify the newspaper against all claims." Maggie thought for a while, and took a long sip of wine. "Righty," she said finally. "What we do is this."

GORGEOUS Georgie, 38, own house, car, country cottage, WLTM Mr. Charming 35-45 for days out and evenings in and possible LTR. Loves fast cars, first nights, and five-star restaurants.

"What's LTR?"

"Long-term relationship. That should do it," Maggie said.

"It's a lot more pushy than mine," Donna said.

"How did you describe yourself?"

She blushed a little. "Independent, sensitive, and cultured."

"Independent is good. He's thinking of your bank balance. But we can't use it a second time. This will pull in quite a few gold-diggers, I expect. We just have to listen carefully to the voice messages and make sure it's Lionel."

"I'll know his voice."

"So will I, sweetie."

"And who, exactly, is Gorgeous Georgie?"

"One of the best stuntmen in Britain."

"A *man?*"

"Ex-boxer and European weightlifting champion. He's been on my agency books for years. He'll deliver Lionel to us, and the money he stole from us. When Georgie has finished with the bastard he'll beg for mercy."

Maggie called ten days later. "He's fallen for it. A really unctuous voice message. Made me want to throw up. He says he's unattached—"

"That's a lie."

"Professional, caring, and with a good sense of humour. He'll need that."

"So what's the plan?" Donna asked.

"It's already under way. I got my film-rights director to call him back. She has the Roedean accent, and very sexy it sounds. I told her to play the caution card. Said she needed to be certain Lionel isn't married. He jumped right in and said he's a widower and would welcome the opportunity to prove it. They're meeting for a walk on the Downs at Beachy Head followed by a meal at the pub."

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"Your rights director?"

"No, silly. She was just the voice on the phone. He'll meet Georgie and get the shock of his life. All you and I have to do is be there to take care of the remains."

Donna caught her breath. "I can't be a party to murder."

"My sense of humour, darling. Georgie won't do anything permanent. He'll rough him up a bit and put the fear of God in him. Then we step up and get our money back."

Maggie drove them to Eastbourne on the day of the rendezvous. She took the zigzag from Holywell and parked in a lay-by with a good view of the grass rise. From here you wouldn't know there was a sheer drop. But if you ventured up the slope you'd see the Seven Sisters, the chalk cliffs reaching right away to Cuckmere Haven. It was late on a fine, gusty afternoon. Georgie and the hapless Lionel were expected to reach here about five-thirty.

"Coffee or Champagne?"

"You *are* well prepared," Donna said. "Coffee, I think. I want a clear head when we meet up with him."

Maggie poured some from a flask. "We'll save the champers for later."

Donna smiled. "I just hope it stops him in his tracks. I don't want other women getting caught like we did. I felt so angry with myself for being taken in. I got very depressed. When I came up here I was on the point of suicide."

"That's no attitude. Don't ever let them grind you down."

"I'm not very experienced with men."

"Well, at least you persuaded the bastard to marry you, darling. You can't be a total amateur. Me, I was conned every which way. Slept with him, handed him my money, accepted his proposal."

"Proposal? He proposed to you? Actually promised to marry you?"

"The whole shebang. Down on one knee. We were engaged. He bought the ring, I'll say that for him. A large diamond and two sapphires. He knew he had to chip in something to get what he wanted. What did it cost him?—a couple of grand at most, compared to the sixty he got off me."

"I had no idea it got that far."

"He'd have married me if I hadn't caught him out. Bigamy wouldn't have troubled our Lionel."

Donna was increasingly concerned about what she was hearing. "But you *didn't* catch him out. When I first phoned, you called him your boyfriend. I had to persuade you that he was a con man."

"Don't kid yourself, ducky," Maggie said with a harder edge to her voice. "I knew all about Lionel before you showed up. I had him checked out. It's easy enough to get hold of a marriage certificate, and when he gave me the guff about the flying accident I checked for a death certificate as well, and there wasn't one, so I knew he

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was lying. He was stupid enough to tell me about the memorial bench before I even saw it. I went to the council and made sure it was bloody Lionel who paid to have it put there. He handed them the plaque and a wad of cash. What a con. He could go on using that seat as his calling card every time he started up with a new woman."

"If you knew all that, why didn't you act before? Why are you doing this with me?" Donna said.

"Do you really want to know?" Maggie said. She reached for the champagne bottle and turned it in her hands as if to demonstrate good faith. "It's because you would have found out. Someday his body is going to be washed up. The sea always gives up its dead. Then the police are going to come asking questions and you'll lead them straight to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Get with it, Donna dear. Lionel is history."

She felt the hairs rise on her neck. "You killed him?"

"The evening he brought me up here to look at the stupid bench. I waited till we got here and then told him what an arsehole he was. Do you know, he still tried to con me? He walked to the cliff edge and said he would throw himself off if I didn't believe him. I couldn't stand his hypocrisy, so I gave him a push. Simple as that."

Donna covered her mouth.

"The tide was in," Maggie said in a matter-of-fact way, "so I suppose the body was carried out to sea."

"This is dreadful," Donna said. She herself had felt hatred for Lionel and wanted revenge, but she had never dreamed of killing him. "What I can't understand is why we're here now—why you went through this charade of advertising for him, trying to find him—when you knew he was dead."

"If you were listening, sweetie, I just told you. You knew too much even before I gave you the full story. You're certain to shop me when the police come along."

It was getting dark in the car, but Donna noticed a movement of Maggie's right hand. She had gripped the Champagne bottle by the neck.

Donna felt for the door handle and shoved it open. She half fell, trying to get out. Maggie got out the other side and dashed round. Donna tried to run, but Maggie grabbed her coat. The last thing Donna saw was the bottle being swung at her head.

The impact was massive.

She fell against the car and slid to the ground. She'd lost all sensation. She couldn't even raise her arms to protect herself.

She acted dead, eyes closed, body limp. It wasn't difficult.

One of her eyes was jerked open by Maggie's finger. She had the presence to stare ahead.

Then she felt Maggie's hands under her back, lifting. She was hauled back into the car seat. The door slammed shut. She was too

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dazed to do anything.

Maggie was back at the wheel, closing the other door. The engine started up. The car bumped in ways it shouldn't have done. It was being driven across the turf, and she guessed what was happening. Maggie was driving her right up to the cliff edge to push her over.

The car stopped.

I can't let this happen, she told herself. I wanted to die once, but not anymore.

She heard Maggie get out again. She opened her eyes. The key was in the ignition, but she hadn't the strength to move across and take the controls. She had to shut her eyes again and surrender to Maggie dragging her off the seat.

First her back thumped on the chalk at the cliff edge, then her head.

Flashes streaked across her retina. She took a deep breath of cold air, trying to hold on to consciousness.

She felt Maggie's hands take a grip under her armpits to force her over the edge.

With an effort born of desperation she turned and grabbed one of Maggie's ankles with both hands and held on. If she was going, then her killer would go with her.

Maggie shouted, "Bitch!" and kicked her repeatedly with the free leg. Donna knew she had to hold on.

Each kick was like a dagger-thrust in her kidneys.

I can't take this, she told herself.

The agony became unbearable. She let go.

The sudden removal of the clamp on Maggie's leg must have affected her balance. Donna felt the full force of Maggie's weight across her body followed by a scream, a long, despairing, and diminishing scream.

Donna dragged herself away from the crumbling edge and then flopped on the turf again. Almost another half-hour passed before she was able to stagger to the phone box and ask for help.

When she told her story to the police, she kept it simple. She wasn't capable of telling it all. She'd been brought here on the pretext of meeting someone and then attacked with a bottle and almost forced over the edge. Her attacker had tripped and gone over.

Even the next day, when she made a full statement for their records, she omitted some of the details. She decided not to tell them she'd been at the point of suicide when she discovered that bench. She let them believe she'd come on a sentimental journey to remember her childhood. It didn't affect their investigation.

Maggie's body was recovered the same day. Lionel, elusive to the end, was washed up at Hastings by a storm the following October.

He left only debts. Donna had expected nothing and was not discouraged. Since her escape she valued her life and looked forward.

And the bench? You won't find it at Beachy Head. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE MOTHER'S DAY MURDERER

by Susanne Mischke

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert.

"Squad car patrols aren't gonna get us anywhere," grumbled Ferdi. "He's never grabbed one on the street. It's always in their homes. When they take out the trash, or go to the mailbox, or go down to the basement for a bottle of wine and leave the door open for just a minute . . ."

"Maybe so," answered Siggi. "But you can't put an officer in every house where some old lady lives. People see us out patrolling the streets and they feel like we're doing something for their safety."

"And of course, it was clear from the start that us single guys would get stiffed," whined Ferdi. "On a Sunday, just when the weather finally turns nice!"

"It's our job. Think of the overtime we're getting."

"I'm thirsty," Ferdi growled. "Stop at the convenience store, okay? Damn Mother's Day Murderer!"

He took another deep breath and looked up at the velvety blue May sky, as longingly as a prisoner about to be locked up for a long sen-

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Susanne Mischke: "Der Muttertagsmörder" first published in *Mord zwischen Messer und Gabel* (c) Gerstenberg Verlag, Hildesheim, Germany; translation ©2008 by Mary Tannert

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tence. *If I were a bird* . . . he thought, humming the first line of the song, and put a finger to the brass doorbell in resignation. He heard it ding-dong inside the house. He heard the heels of her orthopedic shoes on the coconut matting, heard the key scrape in the lock, and watched the door open only as wide as the heavy security chain would permit.

It was no wonder she was fearful. Finally, after the editor-in-chief had ordered him to, he'd written the article: *Will the Mother's Day Murderer Strike Again? For days now, the so-called 'Mother's Day Murderer' has kept the city in terror* . . . Except that it wasn't really the murderer who was scaring people, it was the press. The murderer was behaving very passively. Up to now. *Will he brutally attack and murder an elderly lady in her home once again this year?* . . . and so forth. Every day, the newspapers printed advice and warnings aimed at all the elderly ladies who lived alone, imploring them not to open the door to any strangers.

"It's me, Mom. Open the door."

Through the gap he could smell the food and knew immediately what she would be serving for dinner. He felt his stomach cramp.

There she stood, her lipstick clumsily applied, the typical old-lady permanent wave cemented with hairspray. She was wearing a plaid apron over her cheap, powder-blue crocheted sweater and the obligatory calf-length pleated skirt.

"Oh, it's you." Her long-suffering tone suggested a lifetime of disappointment.

"Hello, Mom."

"You're late. Everything's all cooked to mush, but it isn't my fault."

"Happy Mother's Day." He held out the thirty-euro spring flower bouquet and kissed her yellowish cheek—reluctantly and as briefly as possible. She smelled of lilies of the valley and sauerbraten. He wasn't sure which of the two odors he loathed more.

"That's much too nice for me." She took the flowers and stuffed them in a vase.

He slid past her in the narrow hallway and into the living room. The table was set for three. On the bookshelves along one wall, the photos between the lace doilies and kitschy porcelain statues seemed to be lying in wait for him. One showed him with his book bag, another his father in uniform. Those two were black-and-white. The others were in color: Torsten and his blond wife, their two sweet little children, the big house, the big dog, Torsten in a white doctor's coat, his stethoscope around his neck.

He sat down at the end of the table where he wouldn't have to see the photos. At the other end of its long, polished walnut surface, an enormous floral display flaunted its beauty. Its dimensions and the complexity of the arrangement announced that it was at least twice as expensive as his bouquet, not including the FTD fees.

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"From Torsten. Just beautiful, aren't they?" That long-suffering, self-pitying tone again, as if she lay dying. And yet, organically she was quite healthy. At the word "organic," he was forced to think of the sauerbraten and acid came up his throat.

"Yes, beautiful."

He helped her open the wine. The sweet *Spätlese* in the crystal goblets had the color of honey. He would much rather have had a beer, but beer was low-class, his mother thought. She carried a heavy tray into the room, moving slowly under its weight. It was full of serving dishes and platters, which she arranged in a semicircle on the table in front of him as if flanking the enemy.

"Sauerbraten. You men's favorite." She began to shovel the pus-yellow bits of noodle onto his plate with a large serving spoon. "The *spätzle*'s mushy; it cooked too long. But you just never manage to be on time, do you?"

"I *was* on time. Right down to the minute."

When you're invited to dinner you don't arrive at the last minute, you come a little earlier." She splatted one last spoonful of *spätzle* on his plate.

"Thank you, that's enough!"

"You just eat up. Otherwise, what's the point of my going to all this trouble and spending all morning on my feet?"

Her feet. Were the support stockings she wore really only available in the color of moldy ham?

"You didn't have to cook. You know I always eat a late breakfast on Sundays."

"Well it's not my fault you can't get up at a decent hour because you spend all night Saturday with those party girls, those tramps!"

Her voice had lost that long-suffering tone. Now it cut like the knife she was using to slice up the sauerbraten. The meat lay on a white platter with a golden rim.

"You're sitting at Torsten's seat. Move over there, please." She gestured to a chair on the long side of the table.

"What for? Is he coming?" The corners of his mouth turned up in a malicious grin. There it was, the wart on the face of her model family: They all lived in Baltimore.

"They've promoted him to head of the urology department, did I tell you that?" Yes, she had.

"To each his own. Cheers!"

"Move over there!"

He obeyed, taking his plate with him.

"When will you ever be promoted?"

"I've got my own department: the local news. At a small newspaper, there aren't many chances to move up."

Why was he even telling her this? To her, he would always be a pathetic little scribbler. A loser.

She took off her apron, threaded two slices of sauerbraten onto

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the carving fork and let them slide onto his plate. They landed heavily, with a sucking noise. Then she picked up a sauceboat and poured a watery brown liquid over the whole thing.

"These days, you have to be grateful if you've even got a job when you're forty," he added petulantly.

"Your father was forty when he came back from the POW camp and he started all over again . . ."

"And was dead at fifty."

Resigned to her fate, she dropped into a chair opposite him. For a moment, the gray curls that always reminded him of a king poodle dropped forward onto her large bosom, but then she raised her eyes to heaven with an accusatory expression, folded her hands, and said, "God knows it wasn't easy for me to raise you and your brother alone. But at least your brother managed to amount to something. They're expecting their third child in December, by the way."

He fell silent.

"But it's too late for you, I guess. You don't even have a wife, let alone . . ."

"Father was over forty when the two of you got married," he interrupted her irritably.

"Those were different times."

He decided not to say anything.

"Would you like to drink a toast with me?"

"Of course, naturally, Mom." He raised his glass. "Happy Mother's Day."

"Thank you," she said, and her face took on that long-suffering expression again.

The wine ran warm and sweet down his throat and made him cough.

"Eat up and enjoy, son."

He looked down at his plate. The sauce had grown a skin. The *spätzle* looked like swollen maggots, and a fat, glistening strip of gristle wound its way through the slice of meat like a varicose vein.

He cut off a bite of meat. It was stringy and tough.

"Eat," she said.

"I can't," he said, and put down the silver knife and fork.

The corners of her mouth began to twitch. "Are you trying to hurt my feelings?"

"No, Mom. But I can't eat."

"Your father and your brother loved my sauerbraten. Only you have to make trouble. You've been nothing but trouble and heartache your whole life. Eat, I tell you!"

He took up the fork again and stuck the bite of meat in his mouth. He swallowed it without chewing. Halfway down, the bite triggered his gag reflex and came back up forcefully. It shot out of his mouth and landed on the ivory-colored table runner.

"Now, that's simply . . . !" Under the powder-blue crocheted

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sweater, her bosom shook like Jello in indignation.

"I'm sorry, Mom!"

She rose and looked at him, her eyes narrowed. "So you refuse to eat the food your mother cooked so lovingly for you?"

"Yes. No. That is, I . . ." His voice dwindled to a halt. He knew what to expect next.

She left the room and came back with an icy facial expression and a belt in one hand.

"Do you know what this is?"

He nodded. His hands were sweating.

"Answer me."

"Father's belt," he said in a whisper. Sweat pearled on his forehead. "Please, Mom. I'll eat, I'll . . ."

"Too late! Down you go!"

She was especially furious today. He counted twenty-four blows on his bare skin, six of them with the buckle.

Crying, he crawled back onto his chair. He couldn't sit, he could only kneel on the seat. His face hung over his plate. A smell like vomit rose from the sauerbraten.

She bent over the table, the crucifix on her chain swinging like a pendulum above the meat platter. Her hand took hold of his chin like a vise grip. Her fingernails, with their pearlescent nail polish, dug into his skin.

"Look at me!"

Steely eyes, grayish-pink cheeks, blood-red lipstick, gray poodle curls, powder-blue crocheted bosom, the golden cross above the carving knife with its shiny, polished blade . . .

"And are you going to eat now, eat it all up?"

"Go to hell, Mom!"

A steel blade buried in powder-blue crocheted sweater and flesh. A red spot that grew, as red as her astonished mouth. The red spread quickly through the crochet, coloring it stitch by stitch. Her mouth opened and shut and she fell forward. The poodle curls struck the table between the meat platter and the serving bowl full of *spätzle*.

He allowed himself to sink for one long lustful moment into the sight of it, burned the image into his brain. He registered a growing arousal and knew it would last a long time. Then he straightened the knot in his tie, placed an envelope on the sideboard, and stepped outside into the fresh air. The sun shone, birds sang. It promised to be a beautiful Sunday afternoon.

Elke cleared the table, tore open the window, threw the food into the garbage pail and the red-smeared pullover into the washing machine. She sighed. Sundays were always strenuous, and Mother's Day was the worst of all. During the week, business was pretty much as usual, upstanding fathers and CEOs making

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appointments to be whipped and tormented, but Sundays and holidays belonged to the truly nutty. The man who'd just left, for example. He'd been coming for about six months now, around once a month. But she couldn't complain. She did well by these customers, she thought, as the envelope disappeared into her purse.

She wiped off the knife with the retractable blade and laid it in the drawer along with the poodle wig, the photographs, and the bra with the mammoth latex cups. There was just time for a quick cup of coffee and a shower, and then she'd have to redecorate the room and change clothes. Boris—the one who had a thing for women doctors—was due at four o'clock. She'd have to get out the fake plaster casts and the hypodermic needles.

On Monday, everyone at police headquarters gave a sigh of relief. No one had reported a body. No elderly ladies were found murdered in their homes. The chief of police told the press this was due to the extensive preventive measures they had taken.

So it was only the readers of the local newspaper who were, secretly, just a little disappointed at the headline: *First Mother's Day Without a Murder in Seven Years.* ●

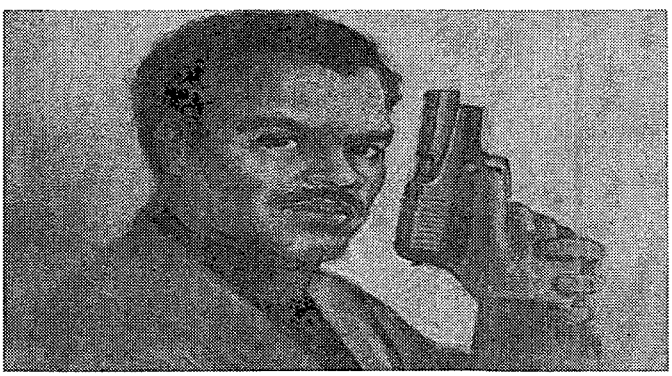
"Go find someone who can close me a perfect homicide."

"In this town perfect crimes just went the way of the duck-billed platypus and th' dinosaur."

"What did you do---replace the whole Department?"

"The guy you're looking for is already with the MPD. Haitian brother—a dude who can close homicide cases without even a clue."

"What did you say his name was??"



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Other People's Litter

by W. Edward Blain

In this tale that he calls an "environmental cozy," W. Edward Blain makes use of his love of the sport of hiking (which he has practiced as far afield as the high peaks of the Rockies). The action of the story takes place in the Smoky Mountains, not far from his home. Mr. Blain is chairman of the English department at a Virginia boarding school, and in his spare time he directs plays and works on short stories and a novel-in-progress.

On Day Six of the search for Sherilyn Cosgrove, Buster Matthews and his dog Bo bushwhacked up the side of a mountain along the banks of a rocky stream. It was one-thirty in the afternoon. Despite the shade of the thick trees, the August air was humid, and Buster, dripping with sweat, fought both discomfort and discouragement. For six hours he had scoured this grid of the Smoky Mountains where Sherilyn Cosgrove might have wandered, and he faced two more hours of searching before he could return to his motel room and a shower. Even in the midst of his clock-watching, however, he had to smile at the irony: Ordinarily he would be happy to tramp the Tennessee back country with his dog. Because he was hiking for pay and on schedule, his favorite recreational activity had become work—and increasingly fruitless work, akin in Buster's mind to, say, searching for symbolism in poetry.

Five days ago Sherilyn Cosgrove, the thirty-eight-year-old star of *Babes in Toyland: Las Vegas* and *Babes in Toyland: Cancun,* had set out on a simple Sunday-morning walk from the Cades Cove Visitor Center in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and had never returned. By evening her husband, Bob O'Malley, had alerted the park rangers, who had informed the F.B.I. Because there was no sign of foul play, all assumed that she was lost. On Monday afternoon her husband, christened Loyal Spouse Bob O'Malley by the increasingly interested news media, had offered to pay any volunteers willing to join the authorities in their search for Sherilyn Cosgrove. Buster, hearing of the search on his radio, was one of dozens to sign on.

Ironically, Sherilyn Cosgrove was enjoying much more publicity

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as a missing person than she had ever managed during her television appearances. Broadcast and print media had arrived in Gatlinburg on Tuesday, and by now everyone had heard the somber recitation of her story: She had set out on her Sunday walk wearing thin-soled sneakers, a white cotton shirt, and hiking shorts. She had packed a bottle of water, a sandwich, and two complimentary chocolates from her room at the Cherokee Orchard Motel. She had departed at ten-thirty A.M. with the stated intention of returning to meet potential sponsors for *Babes in Toyland: Gatlinburg* at one P.M. That had been many days and thirty miles from the place Buster was searching.

Now it was Friday, and this morning when Bob O'Malley had addressed the members of Buster's shift the Loyal Spouse's optimism had evolved into panic.

"This is a crisis," he'd said, as if they hadn't already known. "We have to find her today. We have to find her immediately." His desperation was understandable. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park was a huge place, over 800 square miles of territory and 850 miles of trails, with a million ways for an ignorant greenhorn Hollywood celebrity to get into trouble.

At twenty-three years old, Buster was new to the search-and rescue business, but he knew it was impossible for someone to wander thirty miles across the Smokies without running into a dozen trails, all of which, logically, would lead to a trailhead and to other people. Therefore she must have stopped wandering at some point. All members of the search team tacitly endorsed the most optimistic interpretation: that she was still alive, that they were in a race to find her, and that a successful rescue of the incapacitated or exhausted woman was worth facing brambles, mosquitoes, snakes, hornets, sunburn, heat, and monotony.

Gnats buzzed around Buster's red hair, which stuck out from under his baseball cap. Bo, his Irish setter, had hair of a darker red than Buster's, darker still on the dog's four legs, which were wet from frequent stops to drink from the stream they followed uphill. Buster himself was down to one liter of water in his daypack to stretch over the rest of the afternoon. To pass the time, he played mind games. At twenty-six minutes per mile—slower than his normal pace, because there was no trail—and twelve dollars an hour, how much was he being paid by the mile? In two weeks, classes would start for what he hoped was his final semester of college. How many more minutes remained of his summer vacation? He and three buddies from Virginia had spent ten weeks working maintenance at Tims Ford State Park this summer. How many more miles of the Smokies could the search teams have covered if the other three guys had opted to join Buster instead of continuing on their way home?

Bo barked suddenly and startled Buster out of his reverie so abruptly that he stepped off a rock and into the water.

"If you see a snake, leave it alone," said Buster to his dog,

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annoyed to have his boot and sock wet. Then he spotted the small plastic bottle in the water at his feet. He reached into the stream and pulled out his plunder—a miniature shampoo of the sort supplied gratis in his motel room. The discovery disappointed Buster. There were plenty of places in the park where you could fill up a whole bag with OPL—Other People's Litter—but out here in the back country, off the trails entirely, the place ought to look as fresh as it had in the days before Columbus.

He added the shampoo bottle to his daypack and rinsed his hands in the stream. The air here under the canopy of trees held strange currents of heat and chill. Bo stood on top of a rock just ahead of Buster and barked at something Buster couldn't see. But with another couple of paces, he could smell it over the scent of the pines, and he could hear flies buzzing. His throat suddenly tight, he struggled up to the broad rock where Bo crouched and growled. It was an invitingly level area where the stream formed a shallow pool, and the bank, after a neat border of mud, became a bed of thick moss and ferns.

Lying on this bed was the dead body of a young man. He sprawled on his belly, his right knee and hip slightly cocked, his arms oddly turned with palms upward, as if he'd tried to dive into the moss. He wore good hiking boots, brown nylon shorts, a white T-shirt, and a visor. The visor had fallen off his head when he'd hit the mossy bed.

"Shut up, Bo," said Buster. The dog began to whine, fidgeting. Buster held the dog's head in both hands and looked him square in the face. "It's okay. Relax."

He knew he was talking to himself as well as to Bo. Before he had time to consider otherwise, Buster approached the body. The man appeared to be in his early twenties. He had short black hair and black stubble on his cheeks and looked very familiar. But this was somebody Buster had never seen before. There was blood on the back of the man's head and more blood on a stone the size of a baseball lying beside him. The man's half-open eye stared into the lush green moss, and his half-open mouth appeared ready to take a bite from it.

There was also something that looked like dried strawberry ice cream on the man's right thigh and hand, but the flies were not attracted to it. The sight of it all made Buster feel queasy. He understood that he was looking at a crime victim. This person might have lost his balance and fallen onto the rock by accident, but then his body would never have bounced into its current contorted position. Somebody had rolled the corpse over. Buster could see the bulge of a wallet in the man's back pocket but did not touch it. It was as if somebody wanted the wallet to be in the most obvious, most prominent position, inviting him to extract it. He declined the offer.

Buster used his cell phone to call ranger headquarters. He gave them his GPS coordinates and told them how far he was from the staging area for this morning's search team. He called Carl, his

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supervisor, told him what he had found, and said that he'd be delayed. Then he moved to the opposite side of the stream from the body. He considered phoning some of his friends just for the social contact, but he supposed he should leave his line open in case the rangers wanted to reach him. So he sat down with his dog to wait.

That was when he saw the footprints. The young man wore boots with a distinctive whorl in the tread. Buster could see plenty of the dead man's prints in the mud by the stream. There, too, were Buster's own prints, he realized with embarrassment, mucking up a crime scene. And he distinguished a third set of prints, smaller, from new boots with a waffle grid in the tread. The sight of these other boot prints made him uneasy. He felt his belly cramp and sensed that he ought to eat something, even though he had no appetite. The remaining food in his day pack consisted of a power bar, an apple, two cookies, and one of the chocolates left on his pillow last night at the motel. He chose the chocolate, took a bite, and realized too late that its green foil wrapper indicated mint flavoring. Buster had never liked mint. He re-closed the green foil square over the half-eaten chocolate and replaced it in his pack.

"Time for a tick check, Bo," he said to his dog. It was a feeble attempt to distract them both. He collared the Irish setter, turned his back on the corpse, and tried to think about how glad he'd be to get back home to Virginia. But he couldn't help considering how much the dead man looked like Rich Tolliver.

Rich, a college-age man from Nashville, had been Buster's randomly assigned partner and roommate on the search team until yesterday. Then, on Thursday morning, Rich had gone AWOL. The question with which Buster had entertained himself since his roommate's departure was a simple one: Had he been an asset or a liability?

On the positive side, Rich had no qualms about sharing a room with a dog. The guy was cheerful and gregarious, and within an hour of checking in, he'd met and introduced Buster to Diane and Ruthie Noland, twin sisters from Vanderbilt who worked for the summer on the housekeeping staff of the motel. On the negative side, Rich was blithely unconcerned about responsibilities, expectations, and ethics. After a shower he'd packed two of the motel towels into his luggage, and later he'd lifted several bars of soap from Ruthie Noland's housekeeping cart. During the early days of the search, the motel had provided dark chocolates in gold foil on the pillows each night, and Rich had grabbed both his own and Buster's. On the trail he had discouraged conversation by hiking with an iPod, taken frequent breaks, and quit early. Then, on Thursday, he'd skipped out of his search shift altogether.

"I'll be back," he'd said to Buster yesterday morning as he jiggled his car keys. Clearly dressed for pleasure, he wore his wraparound shades, a flowered shirt, long pants, and flip-flops. "This rescue thing could go on for a good while."

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Especially if people on the search team quit, Buster had thought as he laced his boots. "Where are you going?" he asked.

Rich stood in the open doorway of their motel room in the gray early light and dodged the question. "If my parents or my girlfriend call for me, just tell them you'll give me the message. Don't tell them I've gone anywhere. They think I'm here to work."

"That's what I thought, too."

"I'll be back by Sunday. If the search ends before then, just leave my luggage at the front desk, okay?"

"What's going on?"

Rich Tolliver was a tall guy with a flashy smile. "I'm a gambler," he'd said. "I'm betting this thing will last through the weekend." Then he'd driven away. Buster had been not so much annoyed as amazed by the guy's nerve.

It took almost ninety minutes for a team of three rangers, two men and a woman, to arrive. Buster was glad to see them. One of the men started taking pictures while the other recorded Buster's boot prints and fingerprints. The ranger in charge was the woman, whose freckles and confident smile gave her a presence that offset her physical compactness.

"I'm Ranger Barr," she said, offering him a hand to shake. "You can call me Katie. I own two dogs myself."

Buster liked her right away. Strangely enough, it wasn't until he'd started to relax that he realized how nervous he'd been.

"You go by Buster? Tell me what happened, Buster."

He told her everything. She listened carefully and interrupted only once, when she put on some latex gloves to accept the dead man's wallet from one of the rangers on her team.

"A driver's license, a bank card, a phone card, two credit cards, and eighty-five dollars in cash," she said. "His name is Peter Nicholson. He's from Atlanta. You know him?" She asked this last question casually, but she watched Buster closely as he shook his head. She studied the driver's license. "Twenty-five years old. And what's this?" She pulled out a white plastic card. "A key card from the Cherokee Orchard Motel."

"That's where we're staying," said Buster. "Everybody involved in the Cosgrove search-and-rescue."

She nodded. "Have you touched anything, Buster?"

"No ma'am."

"You're sure? You didn't roll him over like that?"

"No ma'am. I wouldn't do that."

She smiled at his language. "Don't call me ma'am. You make me feel like a crone. It's Katie."

Katie Barr used her radio to report that the victim was in possession of a key card from the Cherokee Orchard Motel. Within a few minutes they learned that Peter Nicholson was neither a member of the team searching for Sherilyn Cosgrove nor a registered guest.

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"Interesting," said Katie Barr, but that was all.

One of the rangers with her, an older man with a graying crew cut, found a GPS receiver in Peter Nicholson's pocket and activated it. "One landmark," he said, showing it to Ranger Barr. "Mile and a quarter from here."

"Check it out," she said. "It's probably his campsite."

The older ranger sighed, smiled, shouldered his daypack, and took off upstream.

"Thanks, Jimmy," she called after him. "You know how grateful our overworked friends from the F.B.I. are going to be."

The other man, a younger ranger, took blood scrapings from the baseball-sized rock lying on the moss.

Ranger Barr pointed to the pink goo on the victim's bare thigh. "Get some of that, too. It looks like medicine." She turned to Buster. "Poison-ivy treatment. I don't need a medical examiner to tell me that. But I doubt it was what killed him."

"How long?" asked Buster. He gestured at the body.

"Has he been dead?" She looked at the corpse thoughtfully. "A day, maybe. The predators haven't done much damage yet, but he's not exactly fresh."

Buster took a drink of water to settle his stomach. "I was wondering," he said, stooping down to pet his dog. "Why would somebody roll him over like that to expose his wallet, but then not take it?"

Katie Barr smiled. "They probably rolled him to remove the pack he'd been carrying. You haven't seen a backpack anywhere, have you, Roberto?" Her remaining assistant said no.

She carefully replaced all the contents of Peter Nicholson's wallet and dropped it into a plastic bag. "In a few minutes the recovery team will be here," she said. "You did real well, Buster Matthews. Can we just go over this one more time?"

It was during the second telling that Buster remembered to show her the shampoo bottle he'd found in the stream. "Maybe that means he was attacked by somebody staying at the Cherokee Orchard," he said. "Or maybe the killer planted it, along with that key card in his wallet. To throw you off the track." He wanted to help.

She was indulgent with him. "Maybe so," she said. "But I'm afraid that little shampoo bottle could have been here for weeks." Still, she politely stored it in an evidence bag.

"As soon as the recovery team gets here, you're free to go, assuming the F.B.I. doesn't appear and make you go through it again," she said. She took down all the information she'd need to find him both in the local area and back at home in Virginia, and she managed to get him talking more than he usually did. He told her how he had worked this summer keeping campsites and trails clean at a Tennessee state park, how he was attending his third college in five years, how he lived with his Aunt Suzanne on the campus of a boarding school.

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"Why so many colleges?"

It was a common question. "I'm basically stupid," he said.

She wouldn't buy it. "Is that what your Aunt Suzanne says?"

He shook his head. "She keeps saying there are lots of different kinds of intelligence. I just remind her that most of my friends have already graduated."

"And no girlfriend at the moment?"

There was nothing in her tone to make him think that it was anything but a casual question, but Buster considered before he answered. Katie Barr was at most thirty-five years old, not at all too old for Buster, but he wasn't sure of how interested she really was and how much she was just trying to take his mind off the corpse lying nearby.

"Not really," he said. "But I've made some friends this summer." He tactfully opted not to specify Ruthie and Diane Noland, the twin sisters from Vanderbilt who worked as summer help for the housekeeping department at his motel. He could thank his roaming roommate Rich Tolliver for the introduction, and he looked forward to seeing the twins tonight after missing them yesterday on their day off. He was particularly hoping to spend some time alone with Diane.

Over the radio came the voice of Jimmy, the ranger who had traced the landmark on the dead man's GPS receiver. "It's his campsite, all right," he said. "Straight up the stream. Didn't really need the compass."

"Any sign of violence up there?" she asked into the radio.

"Negative," said the ranger on the other end. "There's nothing here. I can see where he had a tent set up. An apple core. Orange peel. But the place is empty."

"Apple core and orange peel?" Katie Barr held her finger on the radio transmitter while she thought about that. Then she spoke into the transmitter again. "So you think he'd packed up everything else and got jumped here. They stole his camping gear."

Jimmy's scratchy voice agreed.

She thought for a minute longer. "Any boot prints up there?"

"None," said Jimmy. "He swept the ground with a pine branch before he left."

"But then he just tossed out an orange peel?" Katie Barr was clearly unhappy about the inconsistency. "You see any other trash up there, Jimmy? Anything?"

"Nothing. No fire pit. No sign of burial. He would have packed it out, wouldn't he?"

"Supposed to," said Katie Barr. She looked at Buster and asked the question as much to him as to her colleague on the radio. "So why would somebody kill a man for his camping gear and his garbage?" She pulled out the small bottle of shampoo Buster had given her and considered it more seriously.

Within another forty-five minutes the recovery team arrived, and

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Buster was free to go. It was now nearly five o'clock in the afternoon. Via cell phone Katie Barr helped persuade Carl at the rescue staging area to send a truck to Greenbrier Cove to give Buster and Bo a ride. "You just cut straight up over this mountain," she said, pointing northeast. "It's steep, but you'll manage. You got your GPS? Go due north as soon as you hit the ridge." She gave him directions to the Little Pigeon River. "You call me if you have trouble, okay?" She handed him her number on a business card.

"We'll be all right," said Buster. He felt stiff and sore but happy to be moving.

By the time they reached the ridge atop the designated mountain, Buster was covered in duff, his clothes again soaked through with sweat. But it was all downhill now, and by six P.M. he and Bo emerged from the woods into rich orange sunlight to behold the swift-moving water of the Little Pigeon River.

Bo barked, and Buster, startled, saw a woman sitting on a rock a couple of feet into the stream, her feet fully submerged. It was his first sighting of a person since he'd left Ranger Barr. The woman slumped, exhausted, and as Buster drew close to her, she turned her head to him with mild curiosity. In one hand she held a small square of green foil. Her mouth was smeared as if she had misapplied chocolate lipstick.

"I saved one of the chocolates for when I got to the water," she said. "They always give you two on your pillow."

Her face was badly sunburned, her blond hair matted and dirty, her long-sleeved cotton shirt soaking wet and muddy, her legs and arms flaming with poison-ivy rash.

"Can you tie my shoe?" she asked. As he stared, she pulled one leg from the water and extended her foot. It was covered in a wet, dirty sock, but Buster could see that her ankle was swollen. Beside her on the rock was a pair of dirty sneakers, their smooth soles as blue as the sky.

"Let's get to a dry spot to put on your shoes, ma'am."

She looked at her grubby socks and laughed too hard, then kicked at the water like a playful child. Buster's brain kept checking and rechecking what it perceived here at the river versus what it had been expecting to see in the wilderness. *She had set out with a bottle of water, a sandwich, and two complimentary chocolates from the motel.* "How far do I have to go to get home?" she asked him, her eyes filling with tears.

"Not far, Ms. Cosgrove," said Buster, embarrassed to have temporarily forgotten about her. "A lot of us have been looking for you."

Three hours later, at nine P.M., after interviews and debriefings and explanations, Buster was finally back in his room at the Cherokee Orchard Motel. The message light on his room telephone blinked madly. He dialed the four-digit number of Diane and Ruthie's room in the service wing but got no answer, so he just left

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the room phone off the hook. He shook some dog chow into a bowl for Bo, then turned on his cell phone, which rang instantly. It was Rich Tolliver, Buster's erstwhile roommate.

"I saw you on CNN, dawg," said the loud male voice. Rich sounded especially southern over the phone. "I room with a celebrity. Are you getting a reward?"

"That's what they tell me," said Buster. He scratched Bo's head as he lay on the bed and talked to his former search-team partner. He told him about the body of Peter Nicholson as well.

"Weird," said Rich. "I'd have freaked out."

"So now can I know about your secret mission?"

"Not that exciting," said Rich Tolliver. "I'm just pulling out of Cherokee, North Carolina."

The Smokies straddled Tennessee and North Carolina, and the Cherokee Indian reservation abutted the park on the North Carolina side. But Rich's whereabouts signified nothing to Buster.

"You have an Indian girlfriend?"

"A one-armed one. I'm driving out of the casino parking lot right now."

Then he got it. Rich had said he was a gambler. "How much did you lose?"

"Actually, I made a little. Unless you count the slot machines."

Buster laughed, a little uneasily. He wasn't sure if he and Rich Tolliver were going to be permanent friends or not. "Your bed's waiting for you," he said finally. "You're still registered here."

He considered calling Eddie, Waldo, and Dave back in Virginia, but he settled for one long voice-mail message to Aunt Suzanne. He told her how he had accompanied Sherilyn Cosgrove as far as the hospital in Gatlinburg. The results of a preliminary physical exam indicated sunburn, poison ivy, and dehydration, but no severe injuries. She had miraculously escaped mosquito and tick bites and did not appear to have picked up parasites from unfiltered drinking water. The doctors speculated that she might have hit her head early in the ordeal and that her disorientation could have been the result of a concussion. Or she might have just been delirious from malnutrition. As soon as she'd had some food and water, in fact, she had been coherent enough to speak to the cameras and to greet her ecstatic husband. And to give Buster her autograph.

The memory of the autograph made him groan. Sitting in her wheelchair at the hospital, she'd borrowed a pen from a doctor and improvised a thank-you note on the green foil wrapper of the chocolate she had been eating when he'd found her. On the inner paper liner, the obverse side from the green foil, she had written, *This wrapper held the food that saved Sherilyn Cosgrove's strength, and it goes to the man who saved her life.*

He cringed and just imagined what the guys back home would say when they saw it. "Hey, Bo," he said to his dog, whose tail began

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to thump against Buster's bed. "How much you think I could get for that thing on eBay?" Being a hero was really embarrassing, he'd discovered, especially since his heroism had consisted of nothing but luck. Tomorrow at noon he was to meet Sherilyn Cosgrove and Bob O'Malley at her hospital room for what they called a press event. Then he could go home.

Someone knocked at the door of his room. Half hoping it was the Noland twins, half fearful it was the press, he used the peephole and saw Ranger Katie Barr. She was wilted and grubby in her uniform, though her smile was still fresh when he opened the door. At first Buster thought she was paying a social visit.

"I tried to call ahead, but the phone was busy," she said. "Step out here, please, Buster. I don't want to enter your room."

The air was moist and warm and smelled of honeysuckle and asphalt. Buster stood on the concrete sidewalk beside his door while Katie Barr leaned on the hood of her car, which was parked directly beside Buster's truck. They spent a minute talking about his discovery of Sherilyn Cosgrove, and then he asked if she'd learned any more about the death of Peter Nicholson.

She nodded. "Blunt trauma. He didn't just fall on that rock. Somebody slammed his head against it."

"Any idea of who attacked him?" He wasn't expecting an affirmative answer, and he had already begun to wonder how he might invite her to go to the party in the bar with him.

"You know Diane Noland," she said. "Works for this motel." It wasn't a question.

"Sure," said Buster. He felt suddenly frightened. "Is she okay?"

"And her twin sister?"

"Ruthie," said Buster. "I just tried to call them. What's wrong?"

"They're both in police custody." She paused to watch his reaction, which was shocked bewilderment. "The key card we found in Peter Nicholson's wallet today is a master key provided to the housekeeping department. Each is coded to identify the employee to whom it was issued. That one belonged to Diane. In the room she shares with her sister, we found a bag of Peter Nicholson's dirty clothes. Laundry. Turns out they all went to the same private school in Atlanta. Old acquaintances. Several people saw Nicholson here on Wednesday afternoon while your team was out searching. He had dropped by to take a shower in the twins' room and prevail on them for help with washing his clothes."

Buster still didn't understand. "So they're in custody for their own protection?"

She shook her head. "They're both under arrest for murder, Buster."

He waited to hear her say that she was joking. "That's ridiculous," he said. "Just because they knew him?"

"They've both confessed to killing him."

Now he had to sit down on the hood of the car beside her. It was

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warm. "Why?" he asked.

"Good question." She sounded tired herself. "It depends on which one you ask. We've interrogated them separately." She fanned her face with her hat. "Ruthie claims that she killed Peter Nicholson because he was so obnoxious about using people. He badgered her sister into sneaking him a key card in case he wanted to use their shower, but then he stole some of their toiletries. Then he asked them to do his laundry. Apparently he thought that was funny."

"That sounds like a multiple-choice answer," said Buster.

She agreed wearily.

"What are toiletries, exactly?" he asked. She laughed until Buster explained that it was a serious question.

"Not directly related to the toilet, Buster." She consulted a mental list. "Mouthwash, face cream, a razor blade. Calamine lotion for poison ivy. We saw the pink lotion on Nicholson's leg today, so that gives some credence to Ruthie's story. Aspirin. No prescription drugs, which would be the logical targets."

"Why would he steal that stuff?"

"Who says she's telling the truth?" said Ranger Barr. "Her sister Diane claims that she herself killed Peter Nicholson because he had such a mean sense of humor. He was always taunting them for working as lowly housekeepers, but he then used her key card to steal little sample bottles of soap, conditioner, shampoo, mouthwash, and bedtime chocolates from a storage closet. You found a miniature shampoo bottle at the murder site today, so that gives some weight to Diane's story."

Buster took it all in. "Yesterday was their day off. Didn't they spend it together?"

"They both claim to have gone hiking in the park. Separately. They say that they always spend their day off away from each other because they're together for so much of the week."

He asked her what it all meant.

She shrugged. "At least one is lying. The media had already reported just enough about the circumstances to give each one of them sufficient information to discuss where and how the death occurred. But neither one could explain his missing camping gear. And neither sister has a pair of boots to match that waffle sole we saw at the scene today."

He thought of the twin sisters, both dark-haired, both with perfect skin and teeth, both smart and funny—and kind to his dog. But he didn't really know them that well. "So this Peter Nicholson, this person they knew from home, just followed them to the Smokies? He was just hanging out and stalking them, or what?"

"They were consistent in that part of the story," she said. "Both of them told us he claimed to be here to make a lot of money. He'd been working for one of the big product and image consultants in Atlanta, but he boasted that he'd finagled a leave of absence to

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come here on a gamble."

"A gamble?" He was hearing that term a lot lately. "How far a hike would he have to the Cherokee Indian reservation?"

He'd managed to startle her. "Those tribal casinos are very carefully regulated," she said.

"But not all their customers are," said Buster. He told her about his roommate. "What if Nicholson's backpack contained a big wad of cash?"

"That would be an interesting twist," she said. "But if the twins killed him in order to steal some gambling money, then why would they leave a key card that would lead us straight to them? And why would they confess to other motives?"

"Each sister claims to have done it alone. They're lying to protect each other. Or somebody else."

"Or they're hoping that each confession will cancel out the other one and they'll both go free. You lean toward thinking they're innocent. I'm leaning toward guilty."

Apples and oranges, Buster thought. The cliché put him in mind of what the assistant ranger had found at the deserted campsite today. "Peter Nicholson was carrying a GPS receiver with one landmark on it," he said. "The landmark identified a deserted campsite. But did it have to be Nicholson's own campsite? Couldn't it have been somebody else's? So the apple core and orange peel were another person's litter?"

"Of course." She was both amused and curious. "Where are you going with this, Buster?"

He wasn't sure. "I remember once hearing a riddle about two sisters. One of them always lied, and one of them always told the truth. But you didn't know which was which—"

She nodded. "So you had to ask one sister what her sibling would say, and then do the opposite. What do you want me to ask them, Buster?"

He grinned. "Ask them which one had the worst case of poison ivy."

She asked him to elaborate, but he refused. "It's stupid," he said. "I'm just babbling."

They could hear music from the bar. "Good party," said Katie Barr. "I'm sure they'll want to see the guest of honor."

He didn't move. "You should get the reward," he said. "If you hadn't sent me back the way you did, I never would have found her."

She smiled again. "Very gallant of you, Mr. Matthews. But if you want to repay me, find Peter Nicholson's backpack. The twins had his dirty clothes. But I'd really like to know what was so special about his garbage."

Rich Tolliver, who had arrived sometime in the night, was still faintly snoring when Buster rolled out of bed at five-thirty A.M. and proceeded to dress quietly in the bathroom. He had six hours to

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make one final hike into the mountains before he was to meet with Sherilyn Cosgrove and Bob O'Malley at the hospital.

The bathroom was a mess. Upon returning, Rich had covered the vanity shelf with his belongings, including a plastic bag full of napkins and matchbooks from the Cherokee casino and another with complimentary soap, shampoo, and mouthwash miniatures from the motel. That bag also contained what appeared to Buster's groggy morning eyes to be gold coins. A second look revealed the gold coins to be six chocolate candies in gold foil. They were the pillow chocolates from earlier in the week, and Buster realized that he hadn't seen a dark chocolate candy on his pillow recently because Rich had pilfered the supplies. Disgusted, Buster ate five of the gold-wrapped chocolates for breakfast and washed out the residue with one of the motel mouthwashes Rich had collected. For good measure he unapologetically used one of the bars of motel soap in Rich's stash to wash his face and hands. Then he filled a couple of liter bottles with tap water and put them into his daypack.

Before he left the room, he checked the footwear that his newly returned roommate had dropped on the rug—Teva sandals, size eleven, with a tire-track tread. Rich's feet were too large for the waffle prints in the mud beside Peter Nicholson's corpse. But there was no better way to disguise one's presence than to carry a pair of smaller boots and squeeze into them for a bit of misdirection on the muddy bank of a mountain stream.

Buster loaded his dog into the cab of his truck and drove as close as he could get to the spot where he'd found Sherilyn Cosgrove yesterday. His idea was so far-fetched that he hadn't wanted to embarrass himself by proposing it to Ranger Barr. But he had to see for himself. Once at the place where he'd found the woman sitting with her feet in the water, he began to look for footprints—any prints. All he saw were those of his own boots and Sherilyn Cosgrove's smooth-soled tennis shoes along the bank. Buster was not a professional tracker, and once he stepped away from the softer soil of the riverbank, he lost the trail. That didn't stop him. He proceeded over the mountain to the stream where he'd come across the body of Peter Nicholson. From there it was simply a matter of climbing uphill and following the water.

He found the campsite just before eight A.M. He could see the flattened vegetation where a tent had sat and the boot prints Ranger Jimmy had left during his search and cleanup yesterday. Buster used a length of rope to leash Bo to a tree, then proceeded to circle the area in search of prints belonging to somebody besides Ranger Jimmy. He concentrated on the western side of the site, but even when he fanned out for fifty, seventy-five, a hundred yards, he saw no signs of foot travel. Whoever was smart enough to sweep the campsite before departing was also clever enough to conceal footprints and arrogant enough to leave an apple core and an orange

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peel behind. Discouraged, he returned to the abandoned campsite. It was a pretty spot, level, with some ferns and moss by a flat rock near the water, lots of trees overhead, a deep pool for swimming. He untied Bo and sat on the flat waterside rock to rest his legs while Bo took a drink from the pool. Buster felt exhaustingly idiotic.

The dog finished drinking and splashed water from his muzzle onto Buster's leg. The cold drops felt good. He removed his baseball cap and plunged his face into the natural pool to wash away some of the sweat, and there he saw a speck of gleaming gold on a small rock ledge just below the surface. He reached for it. A pea-sized piece of trash. He unfolded it to reveal the familiar square of gold foil wrapping from one of the dark chocolates at the motel, just like the ones Rich Tolliver had been collecting.

So what, Sherlock, Buster asked himself. This piece of trash could have come from anybody with access to the supplies at the motel, including Peter Nicholson himself. He folded the gold foil into a flat square and stuck it into his back pocket. Then he stretched out on his belly and stuck his head further into the chilly water to look for other litter. He saw mottled rocks, a sandy floor, and, almost out of sight at the bottom of the clear pool, a silvery gleam. The edge of a crushed aluminum can? Or a chip from a casino? It was four or five feet down. At first it looked like a metal ring against a long green rock. Then he realized that the long green rock was actually a submerged sleeping bag.

He withdrew from the water and spoke directly to his dog. "This is going to be so cold," he said.

Bo barked.

"Go on, Lassie," said Buster. "Dive in. Save me a trip." But he had already started to undress.

Four minutes later, having dripped dry and re-dressed, he examined the heavy cargo he had pulled from the natural pool. Inside the sleeping bag was a blue nylon tent with aluminum poles—he had spotted the tip of one pole—and a backpack stuffed with wrappers from freeze-dried food, paper plates and cups, soda cans, empty water bottles, bread bags, fruit pits, banana peels. And crumpled among the jetsam was a soggy but still legible sales receipt with Peter Nicholson's name on it. Here was the murder victim's garbage. In the foot of the bag he had found other treasures as well: face cream, a woman's razor blade, a battery-operated radio, a propane camp stove, insect repellant, four soggy paperback books, a flashlight on a headband, a blue fleece jacket, a waterproof anorak, three pairs of socks, four T-shirts, some lightweight shorts, a new pair of hiking boots. Small boots with a waffle-pattern sole. Inside one boot he found an empty bottle of calamine lotion.

And stuffed into the other boot he found four pairs of women's underwear. Bingo. "Look, Bo," he said. "She killed him."

He called the ranger station. Katie Barr was not on duty, but

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Buster had her cell-phone number. It took two hours for her to arrive, along with Jimmy and Roberto again, but she looked very happy at his discovery. The only unhappy member of the group was Jimmy, the graying ranger who had inspected the site yesterday.

"I wouldn't have noticed anything if I hadn't stuck my head into the pool," said Buster in an effort to comfort the man for his oversight. Then he told the three rangers what he thought it all meant.

Katie Barr used latex gloves to examine and bag the wet evidence. "It's a beautiful theory, Buster," she said. "But very hard to buy."

"Why?" asked Buster. "Sherilyn Cosgrove's ratings are down. They hire an agency in Atlanta to help with some publicity. Peter Nicholson is the outdoors type, so he gets the job of setting up her campsite. On the scheduled day, she wanders off in the opposite end of the park. He picks her up in a car and drives her to within a few miles of her tent and water supply. She takes off her little smooth-soled sneakers and puts on her new hiking boots with the waffle treads—"

"And she camps out with books and food and relative comfort until she's made national headlines," said Katie Barr. "It's ingenious, Buster. And I'm on your side, okay? I want you to be right. But I have to ask all the questions that a lawyer would ask. Can you prove that she bought or wore these clothes? Or slept in this tent? I'll bet Peter Nicholson paid for everything. We'll look, but there won't be any money trail to Sherilyn Cosgrove. And there's one more problem." She looked at Buster regretfully. "What's her motive for killing him?"

"Blackmail," said Buster immediately. "He threatened to expose the whole plot unless she paid him more. Or maybe she was just going to kill him anyway to make sure that nobody knew."

Ranger Barr shook her head. "He takes care of her for a week, and then she kills him? Just throws him away? There's a big difference between fraud and murder. I'll grant you that the appeal of publicity might have tempted a fading celebrity to fabricate a tale of being lost in the woods. But killing somebody? For such an uncertain payoff? If they were in cahoots, and he did expose her, she'd probably benefit even more from the notoriety. There's not enough motive."

"Then how do you explain all these clothes for women with his gear? And the boots?"

"A good defense lawyer could present Peter Nicholson as a cross-dressing kleptomaniac. The Noland twins have already testified that he was stealing their things. And they've also confessed to killing him, remember?"

"But Sherilyn Cosgrove did it," said Buster. "I just know."

Ranger Barr reminded him that the woman had been in very bad physical shape when he'd found her.

That was true. But he suddenly understood why. "She'd spent an extra day in the wild. She'd used up all their food except for an apple and an orange. And that one last pillow chocolate she was

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eating when I found her." He thought of something else. "There must have been some change of plan. That's why Bob was so genuinely panicked on Friday morning. She hadn't shown up on Thursday, as scheduled. He thought she was really lost."

Ranger Barr didn't argue. She was simply more realistic. "It was a good idea to look for shoe prints," she said. "But even if you'd found them, you couldn't prove that she and Nicholson were ever here at the same time."

"So that's it? They win?"

"Of course not," said Ranger Barr. "We'll examine all these items. We might find a clear link between Sherilyn Cosgrove and Peter Nicholson. We might find somebody who saw them together. We'll try. We're just not going to know for a good while. And it's very important for you not to reveal what you've found here, all right? We don't want to alert her to this discovery."

They rushed back, but Buster was still late for his appointment at the hospital. Waiting outside the building were not only the press corps, but also a couple hundred spectators. Rich Tolliver, looking freshly showered and slightly hung over, latched onto Buster as he plowed through the crowd on his way to meet Sherilyn Cosgrove.

"Hey, not cool," said Rich. "You raided my stuff this morning. The mouthwash, the soap. The chocolates, man. Not cool."

Buster recalled the mess in the bathroom. "It's the motel's stuff," he said. "Here. Hold Bo's rope. I can't take him into the hospital."

Rich accepted the makeshift leash but would not relent. "Why'd you have to eat the dark chocolates? This is the last one." He held up in thumb and forefinger a disk wrapped in gold foil.

Buster was sweaty and tired and late. "You can get some more from housekeeping."

Rich shook his head. "They ran out. It's been nothing but mint since Wednesday."

"How can you be so—" Buster was going to say "petty," but he stopped, struck by the significance of what he'd just learned. "Thanks," he said as the hands of the cheerful mob pushed him inside, where he was whisked to the door of Sherilyn Cosgrove's private room. Ranger Barr waited for him.

"They invited me," she said. "I'm getting a little credit for sending you on your shortcut."

"We need to talk," said Buster, but by then they were inside the crowded room. Buster registered a camera offering a media feed, Bob O'Malley in a fresh dress shirt open at the collar, and Sherilyn Cosgrove, fully dressed in black pants and pink top, lying in bed with the backrest up and only her feet under the covers.

"Dear Buster Matthews," she said. "Let me give you a hug."

He didn't want to touch her, and he didn't move.

"Don't be shy," she said. "No more poison ivy. At last I got some medicine for it."

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Poison ivy. He thought about that. Then he thought about the pink goo on Peter Nicholson's leg. And he knew what had happened. "Could I ask you something first?"

"Anything," she said, holding out her arms.

"How far did you walk from your campsite in your socks before you risked putting your shoes back on?"

Her arms dropped. "I don't understand," she said finally.

Ranger Barr cleared her throat, but Buster never faltered. "The campsite Peter Nicholson set up and stocked for you. I was just there this morning. I found all the gear you buried in that pool."

"Buster," said Ranger Barr. She was clearly upset with him for the revelation, but he hadn't had time to explain.

"This young man is delusional," said Sherilyn Cosgrove, who started to get out of bed, and then caught herself. "I don't think it's fair to have the cameras on while he's having a breakdown."

But the cameras kept going, and so did Buster. "He was driving you crazy all week, wasn't he? With his sick sense of humor? Showing up with little bottles of shampoo and skin cream, using them himself, right in front of you, knowing that you couldn't risk the grooming if you were going to pass yourself off as being lost in the woods for so long. He even brought along a woman's razor blade to taunt you."

Sherilyn Cosgrove looked for someone in the room to stop the rantings of the madman.

"It was the poison ivy that finally cracked you, wasn't it?" asked Buster. "Both you and Nicholson came down with it. But he wouldn't share the medication—"

"I don't feel at all well," she said. She groped for her husband's hand. "Could we call my doctor? Could we turn off the camera, please?"

"It must have been infuriating to know that he'd been hoarding the calamine lotion," said Buster. "Was that all it took to make you attack him?"

She shook her head. "Somebody needs to help this young man—"

"Think about the moment," said Buster. "You were all packed up and ready to return to civilization. You walked a mile or so downstream from your camp. Nicholson stopped at that natural rest area and applied the dregs of the medicine. What happened? Did he show you the last drops? Did he laugh at you?"

"No," she said.

"What did he do to make you mad enough to hit him with a rock?" asked Buster.

"He fell on that rock," said Bob O'Malley. "It was an accident."

Sherilyn Cosgrove slapped her husband's hand hard, then held it and smiled for the cameras. "Honey," she said. "Don't complicate matters now. You were not there. And nobody can prove that I was."

"I brought you something," said Buster. He set his backpack care-

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fully on the floor. From his pocket he pulled the tiny square of gold foil he had retrieved from under water and unfolded it. "I found this at the campsite this morning," he said.

Sherilyn Cosgrove laughed. "You think that proves I was there? One piece of trash is like any other."

"Not necessarily." Part of him hated the grandstanding, but he didn't know any other way to proceed. He pulled out a plastic baggie containing her autograph and flipped it back and forth to reveal both her handwriting and the green foil backing. "Those two chocolates you carried into the wilderness with you," said Buster. "Where did you get those? Did you steal them out of a supply closet?"

"Absolutely not," said Sherilyn Cosgrove. She was very confident now. "I'm no petty thief. Those chocolates were on my pillow the night before I left."

"On your pillow Saturday night, before you left for your walk on Sunday," said Buster. He looked at Ranger Barr, who watched him as if he had just performed a magic trick. "But on Saturday night the chocolates would have been wrapped in gold foil. How could you write me a note on green foil when the motel didn't start offering mint chocolate until three days after you disappeared? The only way you could have gotten a mint chocolate was for Peter Nicholson to bring it to you."

Sherilyn Cosgrove's mouth and eyes tightened into thin little slits. Tears squeezed out the sides.

"What did he do to make you snap?" asked Buster.

She sobbed once, and then regained control. "He told me that he'd deliberately rubbed poison ivy inside my sleeping bag," she said. "He thought it was so funny."

Afterward, in the parking lot, Ranger Barr gave him the hug that he'd missed from Sherilyn Cosgrove.

"You gambled," she said. "Very brash, Buster. But not stupid."

He asked her about the Noland twins.

"They're still in trouble," she said. "It's illegal to make false statements to the police."

"Even if each one was trying to protect the other?"

She nodded. "You ought to be a little wary of them, Buster. Each twin thought her sister was capable of murdering Peter Nicholson."

From what he had learned about the guy, Buster could see why.

Ranger Barr waved farewell in the afternoon heat. Buster tipped his baseball cap in response. His truck packed, his dog panting beside him in the cab, he fastened his seatbelt, started his engine, and aimed toward Virginia, toward family and friends and his last semester of college. He didn't really feel any smarter than he had two days ago, but somehow he felt less stupid. "Bring on the homework, Bo," he said. The dog, his head out the window, his ears pinned back by the breeze generated by their acceleration, appeared to grin. ●

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BLOG BYTES

by Bill Crider

Well, it's happened again. A fine blog that was on a brief hiatus has returned. Most of you have discovered this already, but for those who haven't, Steve Lewis's always worthwhile *Mystery*File* **(http://mysteryfile.com/blog)** is back at full strength with book reviews, movie reviews, and a lot more. A daily visit is highly recommended.

Not all mystery writers blog about their books or about writing, at least not all the time. Steve Brewer, author of the laugh-out-loud Bubba Mabry series of private-eye novels (*Monkey Man* being the latest) as well as some fine stand-alones (*Cutthroat*), blogs about being a stay-at-home dad on *The Home Front* **(http://stevebrewer.blogspot.com)**. If you need a good chuckle, you can count on Steve to deliver one, whether he's worrying about losing his masculinity because he's a househusband or wondering why he can't remember people's names.

On the more serious side, there's Martin Edwards's crime-writing blog, *"Do You Write Under Your Own Name?"* **(http://doyouwriteunderyourownname.blogspot.com)**, which is one of my favorite blog titles because that's a question I get all too often. Edwards is the author of two series, one set in England's Lake District and the other set in Liverpool, as well as a number of stand-alone crime novels and short stories. On his blog he writes about all kinds of interesting things, including collaborative authorship, movies, his own books, and fine fanzines like *CADS*. He posts regularly and insightfully.

The Private Eye Writers of America has its own blog, maintained by the organization's founder, Bob Randisi **(http://pwanewsandviews.blogspot.com)**. Only members are allowed to post, but anyone can read it. Its purpose is to present the "news and views" of the membership, and readers of this publication can surely find something of interest in the occasional posts that appear.

Now and then some of you surely stray outside the bounds of the mystery field and read something different. Western novels, maybe. A good blog devoted to current Western writers and Western novels is *Saddlebums Western Review* **(http://saddlebums.blogspot.com)**, which has interviews with such notables as James Reasoner (also known as the author of the legendary Texas private-eye novel *Texas Wind*, not to mention the highly praised crime novel *Dust Devils* from 2007), Richard S. Wheeler, Dusty Richards, and others. The blog also features book reviews and offers links to other Web pages of interest.

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Identity Cards

by Keith Miles

Jenny Fallon had always known about his other women. Her husband was very discreet but even he could not hide all of the warning signs. His job as sales director of a leading chocolate manufacturer obliged him to travel at home and abroad, giving him ample opportunity for extra-marital dalliances. Patrick Fallon took full advantage of those opportunities. He was a lean, handsome man in his late forties, who had lost much of his hair but retained all of his Irish charm. Sales techniques honed over the years were easily switched from chocolate to seduction. He rarely met with rejection.

Keith Miles's literary range is astonishing. In addition to the fine short stories he produces, he's the author of novel-length mystery series involving the worlds of golf and architecture. Under his pseudonym Edward Marston, he has produced 40 novels, set in four different historical periods. And this year, under the Marston byline, a new 1600s adventure-novel series begins with *Soldier of Fortune*. ✝

It was only after the twins were born that Fallon began to stray. At first, Jenny was deeply hurt but she lacked the courage to confront him and she was, in any case, troubled by the thought that she was obscurely responsible. According to the women's magazines that she read, husbands only looked elsewhere if they were not given what they wanted at home. It prompted Jenny to be more sexually adventurous, but her efforts were in vain. The early romance and excitement of their marriage had soon given way, on his part, to a distant fondness. On the rare occasions when the bedroom was not simply a place in which to sleep, all that she had from Fallon was a kind of absent-minded passion.

It was ironic. While Jenny knew the painful truth, everyone else regarded him as an ideal husband—kind, attentive, patient, wonderful with the children, endlessly supportive of anything that his wife chose to do. That was the Patrick Fallon that his friends and neighbours saw. Jenny said nothing to alter their view. She basked in their praise and their envy. She enjoyed playing the game of Happy Families. As the years passed, she came to accept the pat-

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tern of his infidelity. It worried her that she no longer worried about it.

Sean Bantry. That was the name he always gave to the women he pursued. Jenny had found one of the business cards that he had had printed, noting that it gave a fictional address and telephone number in Dublin. Anyone trying to contact him there would be disappointed. The one honest detail on the card was the number of his mobile, a means of communication that he could easily control. Sean Bantry was a single man, a sexual predator with the time, money, and expertise to add to his long list of conquests. He was not the same person as Patrick Fallon. Believing that, Jenny could cope with her situation. Her husband never let her down in public and was always considerate in private. Because of Fallon's virtues, she tolerated his alternative identity as Sean Bantry.

Jenny had had her own offers, of course. She was an attractive woman who had kept her figure and who was extremely popular with the men at the tennis club. But she had never really been tempted. Now that her two boys were at university, she was able to fulfill her ambition of running an antiques shop in the Cotswold village near their home. Fallon set her up in it and she revealed a business acumen that surprised them both. A regular visitor to antiques fairs, she had a sharp eye for a bargain. Over breakfast one morning, she checked the calendar.

"I'm going to the N.E.C. next week," she told her husband.

"Good. You always do well there, Jenny."

"No chance of your coming, I suppose?"

"Sorry, darling. Sales conference in London."

"You always enjoyed the N.E.C. in the past."

"I know," said Fallon. "The National Exhibition Centre has top-of-the-range stuff. None of the usual junk you find at some fairs. The N.E.C. beats them hollow for quality and quantity. Next year, maybe," he went on, getting to his feet and giving her a token kiss. "Must go, darling. Important meeting."

"What time shall I expect you back?"

"Could be a long day. I'll give you a ring."

Jenny went to the door of their country mansion to wave him off. She knew that his important meeting was with a woman rather than with any business colleagues. What gave him away was his air of studied casualness. That was his invariable smokescreen. Patrick Fallon got into his Jaguar and drove off. By the time he reached the end of the drive, he had turned into Sean Bantry, freed from the restraints of married life, ready to embark on a new and thrilling relationship. Jenny was content. She had what she wanted—two lovely sons, a beautiful house, a thriving little enterprise. She did not see herself as the victim of crimes of the heart. When he was at home, Patrick Fallon was all hers.

Two things occurred to change her mind. The first shock came

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when she realised that a piece of jewellery had gone missing from the shop, a Victorian brooch of considerable value. Since it was kept in a locked display case, she could rule out customers with a wandering hand, and none of the women who occasionally worked for her would have stooped to theft. The only explanation was that her husband must have taken it. Showing a genuine interest in antiques, Fallon, a proven salesman, was more than ready to take his turn behind the counter on Saturdays. Jenny surmised that he had stolen the brooch on the mistaken assumption that she would not miss one small item from such a wide stock.

But she did. She remembered haggling successfully for the piece at the Ardingley Antiques Fair, beating down the owner by £100. As soon as she looked at the display case, she saw that it was missing. A disturbing thought hit her. Fallon had wanted the brooch as a gift for another woman. He was not simply a philanderer—he was a thief.

The second discovery was even more alarming. He had an affair—albeit a brief one—with her best friend. In doing so, he had broken the unwritten rules. It had not been Sean Bantry who was up to his old tricks this time. It was Patrick Fallon, her husband, bringing deceit to her very doorstep. That was unforgivable. Jenny felt a sense of betrayal that made her bristle all over. She waited until her anger had subsided a little before she called on her erstwhile best friend. A cool head was needed.

The widowed Anne Kemp was not pleased to see her. When she opened the front door to Jenny, she did not invite her in.

"This is not a good time for me," she said, evasively. "I have to go out soon. I have a doctor's appointment."

Jenny was firm. "Then I'll come with you."

"There's no need."

"Yes, there is. We can talk at the surgery."

"Talk?"

"About Patrick. Or, to be more specific, about you and Patrick."

Anne swallowed hard. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, I think you do."

"Look, Jenny, you'll have to excuse me."

"No," said the other, putting out a hand as Anne tried to close the front door. "I'm not leaving until we've had this out."

"I haven't a clue what you're on about," said Anne, mustering all of her righteous indignation. "I haven't seen Patrick for weeks."

"Is that when he broke it off?"

"No!"

"So *you* were the one who brought it to an end?"

Anne Kemp blustered ineffectually for several minutes before wilting under Jenny's stern gaze. Then she burst into tears and gabbled profuse apologies. She was utterly forlorn. Jenny took pity on her. Stepping into the hall, she put her arm around Anne.

"Let's discuss this over a stiff drink, shall we?"

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Minutes later, they were seated beside each other on the living room sofa with a glass of gin and tonic apiece. Anne Kemp sipped her drink with an edge of desperation. She was a full-bodied woman in her forties with a round, podgy face that was now pitted with anxiety. She drew back from Jenny as if expecting a blow.

"How did you know?" she asked nervously.

"There were lots of clues," replied Jenny. "I can always tell when Patrick is going off to an assignation."

Anne was horrified. "You mean, he's done this *before?*"

"Many times."

"But he swore that I was the first and only one."

"Patrick has that speech off by heart now. I knew there was someone but it never crossed my mind that it would be you. I mean, you're my best friend, Anne."

"That's why I feel so ashamed."

"I trusted you." Anne lowered her head penitently. "Then you stopped helping out at the shop. That set me thinking. When we did meet, you were afraid to look me in the eye. You'd always been so open with me in the past. I'd confided in you."

"I know. Your friendship meant so much to me, Jenny."

"That's how I knew that something was up. You stayed away from the tennis club for almost a month. It was excuse after excuse."

Anne looked up at her. "I just couldn't face you."

"It confirmed all my suspicions."

"Oh dear! Was I so obvious?"

Jenny nodded. "You've never done this before, have you?"

"No," rejoined Anne, "and I'll never do it again. I promise you that. The stress of it all has almost killed me."

Anne Kemp had been badly wounded by the relationship. Fallon had pounced at a time when she was at her most vulnerable. Her husband had died the previous year after a long illness, and she had been left alone in a large house with no children and nothing to divert her except daytime television and the inane conversation of her cleaner. To stave off loneliness, she had volunteered to work at the antiques shop without payment. Anne yearned for human contact.

"I suppose that I was flattered," she said, hands clasped tightly together. "Patrick paid me the kind of attention that I never expected to get again. I didn't lead him on, Jenny. I swear it. Well," she added with a hopeless shrug. "I wouldn't know how to, would I? It was only a mild flirtation—I never wanted it to go beyond that stage—and Patrick was very understanding. At first, that is. Then, one day . . ."

"Spare me the details," said Jenny, interrupting her with a wave of her hand. "All I want to know is how long it lasted."

"Barely a fortnight."

"Who ended it?"

"He did. Patrick dropped me like a stone. I felt so *used*."

Jenny bridled. "How do you think *I* feel?"

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"That's the worst part of it," said Anne, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I hurt the one real friend I have left. You've no idea how much I wanted to play tennis with you again but I just couldn't somehow. I was too embarrassed. Oh, this is dreadful," she went on, downing her drink in one gulp. "I had a moment of weakness and it's cost me dear. I've lost both of you."

"That depends."

"On what?"

"How honest you are with me."

"I'll tell you everything, Jenny. What's the point of hiding it now? You know the worst. Ask me whatever you wish."

Jenny took a deep breath. "Did he ever give you anything?"

"He brought me flowers the first time—red roses."

"I'm talking about gifts, Anne." She saw a hunted look in the other woman's eyes. "Did Patrick ever give you a present?" Anne turned away guiltily. "You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

Anne licked dry lips. "Yes, Jenny."

"It was that Victorian brooch. You coveted it from the moment you saw it. The funny thing is that I intended to give it to you for Christmas, as a thank-you for helping me in the shop. But someone beat me to it."

"Patrick bought it for me."

"No, Anne—he just took it."

"Never!"

"He did. He's the only other person with a key to that display case. Do you see what that makes you?"

"What?"

"A receiver of stolen goods."

"But he told me that he'd paid for it. Patrick knew how much I liked it and said that it was a small token of his affection." Anne was squirming uneasily. "Stolen? That's appalling."

"One more addition to Patrick's long crime sheet."

"I had no idea he'd pinched it," said Anne, "and it was very foolish of me to accept it. Patrick called in one afternoon when I was feeling particularly low, and when I'd been drinking. He promised to get me anything if I agreed to go to bed with him. I chose that brooch." She held up a palm to stifle Jenny's protest. "Yes, it was an awful thing to do, especially to someone I love and respect. But he was so persuasive and I did have a secret longing for the brooch. I assumed that he'd bought it for me."

"And when he gave it to you, he got his reward."

"I told you. I was flattered."

"And do you still feel flattered?"

"No, Jenny. It's as if I've been cast aside like an old rag. I've been completely humiliated. How can I ever hold up my head again?"

Jenny became pensive. She finished her drink.

"Pour us another one," she suggested.

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On the following Monday, Patrick Fallon had breakfast with his wife, made solicitous enquiries about the shop, then gave her a kiss before leaving. After parking his car at the railway station, he was pleased to find that the train was on time and even more pleased when a woman in her thirties sat opposite him. She was not conventionally handsome but she had a striking figure and a face full of character. Since she was travelling first class and wearing a smart suit, he deduced that she was a businesswoman of some sort. While he read his copy of the *Daily Telegraph*, she leafed through some papers from her briefcase. Fallon was intrigued. Hiding behind his paper, he studied her reflection in the window. When he saw the cameo brooch in her lapel, he had his chance to open the conversation.

"Excuse me," he said with his Irish lilt, "but would that brooch happen to be Italian?"

"It would, actually," she replied, touching the piece. "It's my good-luck charm. How on earth did you know where it was made?"

"I have a friend who works in the antiques trade."

"I see."

"From time to time, we go on buying expeditions together. You soon learn to identify certain styles. As it happens, my friend has a similar brooch on display at the shop."

"Really?"

"And you say it's a good-luck charm?"

"Yes," she explained. "It's my first day in a new job so I put it on. It never lets me down. I wore it at the interview. It helped me to secure the position."

"Where do you work?"

"Lincoln's Inn."

He was impressed. "You're a barrister?"

"No, I'm an executive director."

"You mean, you hand out the cases to the appropriate people?"

"The clerks do that," she said. "My role is administrative. I make sure that the chambers run smoothly, responding to individual needs of the barristers, supervising any mergers—we've one coming up, as it happens—and generally oiling the wheels."

"It sounds like a high-powered job. How did you get it?"

"I was head-hunted. After five years in senior management with an insurance company, I was ready for a change. Thanks to this little chap," she said, patting the brooch, "I was able to make one."

The drinks trolley arrived, but she refused his offer to buy her a coffee. He was not daunted. Nor was her wedding ring a deterrent. Most of his conquests had been married women. They wanted novelty. He pumped her for as much information as he could before telling her about himself.

"The name's Bantry, by the way," he said. "Sean Bantry. I run the English part of a large holiday company based in Dublin. In case

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you hadn't noticed, I'm Irish."

They shared a laugh. She showed a set of perfect teeth and there was a sparkle in her eyes. Fallon slowly turned on the charm, paying her small compliments, probing for details of her private life, gaining sympathy by telling her that his wife had been killed in a car crash a year ago and that he was still recovering from the loss. Long before they reached their destination, something beyond casual interest had been established. Sean Bantry was at his most beguiling. Monique Walters—her mother was French—seemed increasingly drawn to him.

"It's a red-letter day for me as well," he confided.

"Is it?"

"Yes, Monique. I met you."

She grinned. "Nice to know that I have that effect on people."

"We ought to celebrate somehow. I don't suppose that you'd like to meet up for a drink before you catch the train home this evening?"

"I can't, I'm afraid."

"Not even for a very quick drink?"

"No, Mr. Bantry."

"Sean, please."

"I have . . . other plans," she said.

"Another time, then?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure about that."

"Then why not think it over?" he said, extracting a business card from his wallet. "There's no hurry. I spend a lot of time in Dublin but I'm in London every other week. If you change your mind, call me on my mobile." He offered her the card. "Okay?"

After a moment's consideration, she took it and glanced at it before slipping it into her handbag. "Thank you," she said with a noncommittal smile. "Who knows? One day, I might need that drink."

The calendar on the kitchen wall had a series of pictures of the Cotswolds on it. As she crossed off another day, Jenny Fallon glanced at the tranquil scene in the photograph and realised why she loved the area so much. Running an antiques shop in one of the most beautiful parts of England was her conception of bliss. She did not want her dream to be blighted. Her husband came into the kitchen and checked the contents of his briefcase before snapping it shut.

"I'm off now, darling," he said, depositing a tepid kiss on her cheek. "Lots to do at the office. I may be late back."

"No hurry. I'll be staying on at the shop after closing time. Anne has promised to help me with the stock-taking."

He was surprised. "Anne Kemp?"

"Yes," said Jenny.

"I thought you'd given up on her. How is she?"

"Much the same. You know Anne."

"Yes—poor woman!"

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"Derek was a good husband," she said, "and he did everything for her. His death knocked her for six. I wouldn't dare say this to Anne, but what she really needs is another man—someone to bring a little happiness back into her life. After all, she's not unattractive."

"She's dumpy."

"Patrick!"

"She is, darling. I like her a lot, but the truth has to be faced. Anne has let herself go badly. She's put on too much weight. What man would give her a second look?"

"I was hoping that you might suggest one."

"Me?"

"You've got dozens of male friends at work and at the golf club. Surely, there must be a man of discernment among them."

"Dozens."

"Pick one out and introduce him to Anne."

"That would be unfair on both of them," said Fallon with a snigger. "She'd get her hopes up and he'd turn tail as soon as he clapped eyes on her."

"Anne is not that bad," she said, defensively.

"She's a frump. A fat, dull, dreary, middle-aged frump."

"Don't be so cruel!"

"Cruel but accurate," he went on. "No man in his right mind would go for a woman like that. Anne has her virtues, but she has the sex appeal of a dead walrus. To be honest, I've no idea what Derek ever saw in her. Anne Kemp could never press any of my buttons."

Jenny gritted her teeth. "You'd better go."

"Advise her to go on a diet—lose some of that blubber."

"Get out!" she said, pushing him away.

Fallon went out laughing. Jenny could not believe how brutal he could be about a woman he had taken to bed only months earlier. She was disgusted.

Monique Walters had held out much longer than he expected. They had met for a drink on three separate occasions, over a long period, before she began to crack. His gift of a silver locket finally tipped the balance. Monique capitulated. Looking as chic as ever, she was waiting for him in the lobby of the hotel that evening. She had already rung him on his mobile to tell him her room number. By prior agreement, they went up in separate lifts so that nobody actually saw them together. He followed her down a long corridor and admired the sway of her hips. When she let herself into a room, he checked that the coast was clear before slipping in after her.

Their first kiss was everything that he had hoped it would be. As she stood back, she took the slide from her hair and let it tumble down to her shoulders. It made her look even more irresistible. He reached out for her.

"Not so fast, Sean," she said, holding him at arm's length. "Let me

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slip into something a little more inviting."

"You look inviting enough to me."

"Open the Champagne—and get into bed."

Sean Bantry beamed. "Your wish is my command."

"I won't be long," she promised. "I have something rather special in the bathroom."

As soon as she had left, he opened the Champagne waiting in the ice bucket and let the cork bounce off the ceiling. After pouring two glasses, he had a first taste, then tore off his clothes. He lay on the bed. Monique had resisted him at first but she was eager to make up for lost time. One more notch would soon go on the Bantry bedpost.

"Are you ready?" she called from the bathroom.

"Ready and willing."

"Naked?"

"Completely."

"Shut your eyes—I have a surprise for you."

Fallon did as he was told. He heard the bathroom door open and felt a tingle of anticipation. He longed for her to touch him. When she did so, however, it was not only Monique's hands that he felt. While three people held him down by force, a fourth tied a blindfold around him and thrust a ball of cotton wool into his mouth, anchoring it in place with a strip of duct tape. As if the manoeuvre had been rehearsed beforehand, he was then rolled quickly over so that the tape could bind his hands together behind his back. Fallon was spluttering with rage but he could not escape. Giggles of triumph came from the four women.

"Out you go!" said Monique.

Grabbed by the quartet, he was bundled out into the corridor and pushed halfway along it. Fallon was then spun crazily around so that he lost his bearings completely.

"We'll throw your things out through the window," said Monique, enjoying his discomfort, "so there's no point in going back to the room. Goodbye, Sean."

Stark naked, sweating from every pore, and thoroughly mortified, all he could do was to cower against a wall and make pleading sounds. No mercy was shown. The harsh laughter of the women echoed along the corridor. Monique had a farewell request.

"Be sure to give my regards to Patrick Fallon, won't you?"

It was late when he got home, having endured the most shameful few hours of his life. After a series of embarrassing encounters with astonished hotel guests, he had eventually been rescued. One of the porters removed his bonds and found him a bathrobe in which to wrap himself. Fallon's clothing was retrieved from an alleyway at the rear of the building. It was torn, crumpled, and filthy. The saving grace was that his briefcase, wallet, watch, and keys were intact. On the train journey back, he sat in a corner and searched

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for words to explain his appearance to his wife. Jenny was very gullible—he'd traded on the fact for years—but even she would wonder how his suit had got into such a state. He decided to tell her that he had been mugged in the station car park. It would earn him instant sympathy and keep any suspicion at bay.

As he stood outside the house, he rehearsed his lines for the last time, then composed his features into an expression of anguish. Shedding his identity as Sean Bantry, he was ready to be the ideal husband again. There was only one problem. His key no longer fitted the front door of his house. Surprise gave way to irritation, then quickly turned into fury. He rang the doorbell and pounded on the timber with his other fist. A window opened above his head. Holding a glass of wine, Jenny looked out.

"Let me in!" he demanded. "My key won't fit."

"I know. I had all the locks changed."

"Why?"

"To keep you out, of course," said Jenny before drinking her wine. "You don't belong here anymore, Patrick."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Your visit to the Howard Hotel this evening."

"I haven't been near the place," he yelled. "I was at a meeting that dragged on until well after seven. When I got back to the station, two lads mugged me."

"Two lads—or four women?"

"What do you mean?"

"Stop lying," she advised. "I was there with Monique. And so was Anne Kemp. After the callous way you dumped her, she wanted revenge as well. Then there was Harriet Lentle—remember her? I got her details from your address book when you weren't looking. You'd put a line through her name so I knew she was another one of your back-numbers."

"Jenny, for heaven's sake, you can't keep me out here like this."

"Oh, yes, I can."

He tried to sound reasonable. "Let me in and we'll talk about it properly," he said. "I owe you a small apology."

"You owed a very large apology to Harriet Lentle. You ditched her after only a week, it seems, then refused to answer her calls. She went all the way to Dublin in search of Sean Bantry."

"Silly bitch!" he murmured.

"When I asked her if she'd like to get her own back, Harriet jumped at the chance. So did Anne Kemp. We were representatives of all the other women you exploited then tossed aside. As for Monique," she added, "that's not really her name. She's an actress who comes into the shop from time to time and the role of temptress rather appealed to her. You were outwitted."

"Jenny, how could you *do* this to me?" he asked in a tone of self-pity. "I'm your husband."

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"Not anymore. You changed your identity and so did we."

"We?"

"Anne Kemp and I. We were fed up with being the loyal, gentle, easily pleased, submissive women we'd always been in the past. So we issued new identity cards for ourselves. Thanks to you, we became strong, independent, resourceful human beings." She glanced over her shoulder. "Didn't we, ladies?"

Three more faces crowded at the window. To his chagrin, Fallon recognised Anne Kemp, Harriet Lentle, and the woman who had called herself Monique Walters. They waved happily to him. His ire surged.

"There'll be repercussions," he warned, waving a fist. "I'll have the pack of you arrested for common assault."

"Even you wouldn't risk the publicity," said Jenny. "It would turn you into the laughingstock. Besides, our crimes pale beside the ones that you perpetrated with a false identity. Sean Bantry left a trail of deceit, misery, and disenchantment behind him. Crimes of the heart are the worst of all to a woman. Goodbye, Patrick."

She slammed the window down. Fallon was completely dazed. Everything he had built up over the years had suddenly been snatched away from him. His children, his wider family, his priest, his friends, and his employers would soon learn the ugly truth. His quiet, amenable, long-suffering wife had thrown him out. There was no way back. His career as Sean Bantry had ruined him. The window opened again and Jenny popped her head out.

"Go on!" she ordered. "Take your identity crisis away from here." ●

Waiter en Brochette

by Magda Kari Mastrogiovanni

"Out of my kitchen!" roared Kirby the chef.
But the impish waiter turned an ear that was deaf.
He taunted the chef, got in his way,
Tripping him snidely day after day.
This so enraged Kirby that sooner than later
He took a sharp spit and skewered the waiter.

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Art by Allen Davis

Shining the Light

by Neil Grimmett

Because I am an honest man I *need* to put down this tale exactly as it happened. I start by stating this fact, for it has been said that "all Cretans are liars"—but the man who said that was a Cretan.

My very good friend—and husband to my wife's cousin—Yiorgos had opened a bar, high on a hill overlooking the sea, with a view of Theodori Island floating in the Gulf of Chania. He'd even thought of putting one of those pay-as-you-peep telescopes on the terrace, so the customers could take a turn, with the possibility of seeing one of the rare Kri-kri, the ancestral wild goats that inhabit the place. Of course, as usual, it came to me to point out that as most of his customers would be turning up after dark, his money might be better spent.

I hadn't the heart to tell him on what, say a stair lift or cable car. I've been watching the tourists since they first started coming and for most of them, in our heat, a steep walk of nearly a kilometer for an expensive cocktail with no moussaka or Greek dancing is an unlikely event. They like to saunter up and down in their ugly shorts, T-shirts, and caps, keeping on the flat strip yards away from

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the sea, harassed and herded by restaurant touts, excursion guides, and souvenir-shop owners, while they weigh the price of everything and seem desperate to find what we laughingly call "a Kafenion friend"—that special someone to make sure you stay in touch with this wonderful land. Your private Greek god to guide your footsteps and make certain you come back—and to the right place.

Now it has become a duty for me to turn up here and, in truth, act as bait for anyone determined enough to have made the ascent. The theory being, if it is good enough for the Greeks then it must be pukka and well-priced.

Poet and short-story writer Neil Grimmett has more than fifty short stories in print in publications in Britain, Continental Europe, Australia, South Africa, Canada, Singapore, and the U.S. He's won the Write On poetry award, is a three-time winner of the Oppenheim John Downes award, and has received a major British Arts Council bursary. For his first appearance in *EQMM* he's produced a tale set on the seemingly idyllic island of Crete. ✝

I've been sitting alone for some time, looking down at the spreading mass that was once a village, thinking about what a fool I made of myself with a girl young enough to be my daughter. To my credit, I saw the truth and called the stop; to my shame, it took too long and my children may know and the ghost of my poor wife haunts our villa, souring the wine and refusing to forgive. Yiorgos is playing backgammon with the very pretty waitress—hired especially for her attributes—and is either on the way to, or is already, making the same sort of fool of himself. As Kondylakis wrote, women are devils.

Alien music, English or American rock, drifts down towards what remains of the old heart of the village, where, paradoxically, someone sits on their terrace playing a lyra. A black-and-white cat prowls the stone floor of the bar and cicadas fret-saw the night into geometric unswallowable portions.

Then they arrive.

I think straightaway the woman is Greek, possibly from this island. Cretan women are the most beautiful in the world: thick-lipped, big-breasted, black-haired arrogant Amazons that have turned many conquerors into slaves. And she could hold her own with the best of them in Chania. Much too stunning to be English, though the man clearly is, and speaks it to her. She has dark hair and refined features; her lips are voluptuous, eyes deep, demanding that you look and look quickly away. She is wearing a very short black dress covered with tendrils of yellow flowers. It is tight-fitting and her figure makes even this old man gasp. Her partner

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is quick-moving and has wolfish, intelligent eyes that are pretending to be unobservant while cutting through everyone with X-ray precision. She speaks to him in perfect English, before bending down and sweeping the cat to her full breasts. They sit down at a table near to me and I hope, for once, the German couple will not arrive on the dot.

The man orders red house wine—ignoring Yiorgos and the now-made-to-look-plain waitress's attempts to get them to take one of the toxic cocktails or evening specials. They remain close together and stare down over Chania Bay, where a few fishing boats sway their lights like fireflies lost at sea and the wise Cretans count how many are out and decide if it should be fish or meat for tomorrow.

Yiorgos keeps nodding, slyly, he thinks, but really like a donkey. It's his signal begging me to go and offer them drinks and seats at my table to make certain this becomes their special place for the rest of the holiday. But there is something about these young lovers: a sadness—which, I sense, has nothing to do with how they feel about each other—but still one I do not wish to intrude upon. I see their hands close together over the coolness of the rail; the cat already asleep on her lap opens and closes a paw on the whiteness of her thigh. And the strangest thing is, I believe they want to meet me and are waiting.

I hear the German tourists stamping up the hill and know that they will ignore me and make straight for this interesting-looking couple. I decide to go over to them first.

"Excuse me," I say. "May I welcome you to my good friend Yiorgos's music bar and to Kreta? My name is Spiros."

The woman smiles and reaches out a hand. "Thank you," she says, "I'm Marietta and this is my husband, Richard. We're from England."

He flashes me a look: not friendly, not hostile, but wary, as if he has learnt something about Greeks that he does not trust.

"Would you like to join us?" Marietta asks—beating me to it—and I say yes.

I accept a glass of wine, while telling the waitress who brings my glass to fetch some tsikoudia.

"Yamas," I say, giving it the full over-the-top Zorba bit.

And they respond with a gentle *"s'yeia,"* pronouncing it correctly and confirming my suspicion that they know more about this place than most visitors ever would. The small bottle of iced tsikoudia arrives and I fill three glasses. "This is raki," I tell them, "our traditional gesture of welcome. The hand of friendship being offered."

We down the drinks in one swallow and bang the glasses on the table.

"Where did this one come from?" Richard asks me.

"The raki?" I respond.

"The tsikoudia," he says, using its Cretan name and again getting

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the stresses perfect. "From which village still, which 'kazani'?"

I could easily say that I don't know. Or give him one of the commonly known places; somewhere tourist-friendly with, at the right time of year, the chance to see the spirit being distilled. They even do a demonstration on Chania harbor which I could direct them to. Instead, I tell the name of the obscure little village, not even on most maps. I was in charge of the kazani there and am proud to believe that I produced the best tsikoudia on Crete. But I become aware, as he locks eyes, questioningly, with his wife, that it is not the real reason for him asking me. So I'm glad when the German couple arrive and there is little room for us to continue.

One lesson you learn quickly in the tourist trade is that the English and Germans can be a problem together. And the signs are not always obvious. Forget those patriotic T-shirts or indelible tattoos of intolerance carved into flesh. It's the deep smoldering fire you must learn to watch for in case it ignites. But this gathering, smartly dressed and sipping drinks, seems safe. Even the normally nervous Yiorgos looks content and smug.

The Germans have been coming to the island for years, and love to offer their instant appraisals and opinions on everything, from how quickly you can "do" Samaria Gorge to how much you should pay to own a slice of Crete. Foreigners are buying the place up in droves at the moment: every plot of land or old ruin now seems to carry a price tag. I know one village not far from here where just about every old house has been restored and piece of land developed. I asked Nikos—who's been mayor twice—the last time I saw him sitting on a donkey and working the poor thing to death, the lazy bastard, "What do you think of all these Franks buying up your village?"

"Ah," he replied, tying the beast's urine-soaked rope around someone else's hedge so that it got a free feed. "The village was dead. Now it is alive again."

I've heard the truth, though: how the Germans have taken one section, the English the other. They do not stray into the same tavernas—which, incidentally, the English call "The Pub"—or use the same store or bakery. They criticize and blame each other for the constant water shortages their pools and endless demands make. One English tourist got bit by a horse fly and I heard the taverna owner tell her that it was because she had wandered through the German "sector." This same man also told me something else: that the English wanted to book his place for their Christmas party. He could understand why they said no German or Scandinavian guests were wanted. "But why," he asked me, "did they also insist that there should be no Greeks allowed in that night? Why?"

Tonight, I do not think I will have to try too hard to keep things sweet—though I am more than willing. In truth, I'm retired, but have a small investment in this place. I like to keep a few irons warming. My eldest son runs the hotel now—another lazy slug

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with a big mouth and no brain to control it. He spends the day sleeping, then raises hell all night. But what can you do? He's mine for life. As are his brother, his sister, and their children. This is Crete: Everything is for the family and its continuance. I could even see one of my grandchildren running this place when I help put it in order.

The English couple have gone quieter, and I sense they are getting ready to leave. Herr Doctor and his wife have been to visit the Orthodox Academy in Kolimbari and are insisting that the English must go there—they have also been to the German war cemetery in Maleme and are clearly moved by the whole experience, I think.

Herr Doctor (he's a doctor of teeth and she, his second wife, a former dental nurse) is telling us how he met the director of the academy and judged him well-intentioned and *quite* intelligent, though he did not understand all of the stuff about his shard of broken mirror and his need to keep shining a light from it into all of the darkness.

Apparently, Herr Doctor explains, the director took a piece of glass from an antique mirror that had been shattered when a *stray* German bomb destroyed his house, killing his father and grandparents. He then went around through the rest of his childhood and adolescence reflecting the sun off its surface into all the hidden shadows, until he saw the light and knew what he must do: illuminate the dark places of this world.

Dark places? I often think they are best left undisturbed. Who really wants to keep going back into what was obscured, usually for the best reasons?

There's an awful silence. The clack of backgammon pieces sounds like rifle shots in a Sfakian dawn. So I must try to explain,

"If you go to Kolimbari," I say, "and climb the coast road a little way towards the monastery and then wait until the night comes, you will see, high on the cliff above the academy, a cross light up and glow from a church cut into the rock. It marks the site of a mass grave of young Cretans killed as they tried to defend the airfield at Maleme." I feel the Germans tense and add quickly. "On the other side of the Bay of Kissamou, facing that cross, there is another light: It glows from the war cemetery of Germans killed in the same battle.

"Thelemacus, the director, built the academy in the hope that if some sort of reconciliation could be reached here, it might be possible to achieve it everywhere. That is what this great man saw by shining his little light into the darkness. It's what we see now in these lights that really counts, I believe."

The Germans raise their glasses to my speech. Richard gets to his feet.

"What about a girl who vanished?" he says loudly. "A young mother, an English lady who'd fallen in love with a Cretan. One who may have had a village named after her. What ray, and from whose shard of mirror-glass, will shine some light onto her?"

His beautiful partner gets up and I see tears in her eyes. My blood

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turns colder than ice and words are frozen in my throat. Richard tosses some money onto the table—more than enough to pay for all of the drinks—and walks off with Marietta holding his hand.

Everyone else is staring at me as if it is something that I have said.

I recover slightly. "Ha, let me give you a warning about this drink." I lift the empty bottle so that the idiot Yiorgos jumps up thinking I'm calling for a refill. "When the Turks conquered Crete and discovered tsikoudia, they quickly made up a saying: 'One glass is worth a gold piece, two glasses are worth two gold pieces, three glasses, though, are worth a farthing.' And our young friend just had four."

They look slightly appeased, though still not certain.

"Did you not see his face?" I ask, desperate to leave. "Another Turkish expression, 'fezzed'—red like the hat—to be drunk." Now they laugh and Yiorgos slams down another frozen bottle of tsikoudia, which he will pay for.

It is not difficult for me, with all my contacts, to discover where the English couple are staying: a small private villa that belongs to a nice family from Italy. I actually found it for them years ago, and an uncle of mine acts as their letting agent, another young cousin does the maintenance. It seems that you need everything in the family these days to get by: except too many secrets.

It's possible, if you walk the right track, to pick your way through the vines and olive trees and end up directly under the villa's bedroom balcony unseen. I have to make my way to it in case there's any chance of overhearing them. To learn, if I can, what else they may know.

I get myself into position and wait. At first, all I can hear are the cicadas. There are many large, ancient trees in this grove and they are all full of them by the sound of it. Then I can make out the gentle mournful *poo-poo* of the scops owls as their question-and-answer game becomes a harmony, becomes a song. Then, as all the noises become as uniform as the soughing of a gentle sea, I hear them. It's an unmistakable noise and everything about my character wants to leave them to this intimacy. But my legs refuse to move. The bed is sending out a powerful rhythm and I can hear her gently moaning. Pillow talk often follows sex. I try to convince myself I must wait in case there is any. On and on it goes. And though we Greeks are the best lovers in the world, these are clearly experts. In my long marriage—with also, quite a few flights of the wild bee—I have not heard the like. It makes me yearn to be young again—for a night anyway. But then, as they say, it takes two.

My feet are aching. I want to water a thousand-year-old olive tree, and I rarely go more than half an hour without lighting a cigarette. Now the bed is creaking so violently I guess the owner will soon be on the market for a new one! Shadows are wildly dancing out from the window, and her screams are making the Cretan cats sound tame. I see a slight movement on one of the trees and catch

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the *tzitzikas* in my hand. I hold it and let its vibrations send out the good luck to them as I hear their painful joyous ending. A pulse of heady scent from the night flowers moves towards them as I creep off to my empty bed. They will have no troubled words tonight—and I envy them their comfort.

They do not turn up at the bar the next evening, nor the following one. I take a walk, but the villa is closed up. I leave a bottle of my twenty-five-year-old wine on the stone table outside their door. A thick, potent brew, once red, now brown and fortified many times with the best Cretan brandy. When I sneak my next look it has gone and a 4x4 hired vehicle is parked outside. I can see that it has been working very hard and wonder where they have been exploring.

The same evening—just as a party of water-colourists make Yiorgos's month by ordering pastel shades of ice cream and vivid brush strokes of cocktails—Richard arrives alone and makes straight for me.

"Thank you for the wine," he says and sits at my table.

I am taking a little ouzo and water and signal to the waitress to bring another.

"We discovered the village," Richard tells me after I pour some cold water to turn the clear spirit milky and release the aroma of herbs. "The one the tsikoudia came from." I am shocked, but try to keep my reaction hidden. "I even found the kazani. Cold of course—though we tried to picture it working. But it was hard to really imagine. Could you explain?"

So I do:

"After the grapes have been gathered and the wine made, the pulp that remains is put into containers and left to ferment. Then, when all the correct licenses have been granted, the kazani is lit with a huge olive-wood fire that will be kept going day and night. The vessel above the fire will have its secret mixture of herbs and aromatics thrown into it, followed by the fermented pulp. Next, a copper lid with its long elephant trunk will be fitted to the top and sealed with clay to make it airtight."

Then I get carried away: Always I love to tell stories and cannot help myself from spilling out my soul in sentences that wind out and curl back until I am satisfied I have said enough, or said too much, as I try to paint the full picture: a huge man stripped to the waist, glistening in sweat, with his smaller helpers gathered around. He is the Devil stoking the inferno—oblivious to the heat, sparks, and smoke, while the cauldron boils. I try to sketch the villagers gathered around feasting, as the afterglow of the day gives way to the dancing flame and the breath of spirit begins to condense from a stream of alcoholic fire into liquid. The first glass is carried to the head of the village for approval. Finally, shovelfuls of hot coals are thrown onto grills and the meat begins to sizzle and

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the chestnuts wait. I am just going to describe the end of the first batch and the hissing removal of the lid, when I realize he is not listening but leading. My father had many sayings, but one in particular has served me well: "One little Greek can do more in business than any two Jews put together." And believe the little Greek: He was right. So I know when I am being set up, only too easily. I stop talking and let my smile stay firm.

"So when exactly do they do it?" he asks.

I give a vague answer that tells him little. I mention it has nothing to do with any calendar he would understand—and that even the pull of the moon can be taken into account. But he pushes the matter, asking if they would be allowed to watch if they returned at the correct time. Would I even take them?

"Look," I coax, "there are sometimes demonstrations on the harbour in Chania. Go to one. Why do you want to visit that village anyway? There are many others, bigger ones, used to tourists, that will offer you hospitality. Why do you think I would be made welcome at that particular one?"

"We saw your family name on a monument. To a leader of the Resistance who was executed."

"It is a common name on Crete," I inform him.

"What *do* you know about a girl who was hanged in that place? I asked in the village and was told by one very drunk man that the village was named after her, then by several others that it was not and it was just something dreamed up for the inevitable arrival of tourism."

"Then I should believe who is the most sober." The Germans arrive and take one look at the two of us, now leaning forward on our seats—a young goat and an old ram about to lock horns—and they flee to join the soft watercolours of spring flowers and sunlit seas.

"Marietta's grandmother came to Crete when she was seventeen. She fell in love with a much older man, a married man, a kapetanios, who loved her in return. She sent some letters home which the family still have. They were full of romance and pain: about their love, the hatred from all of his family, and the hostility of the other villagers towards her. They had a child and lived for a time on the edge of the village in an old stone house. Then the war came. My wife's mother came back from here to England as an orphan with a few possessions. But those possessions have stayed and haunted all of us who have seen them. Nothing will induce her to return to this country. Now she is terminally ill and Marietta wants to find out the truth for her before she dies. Among the papers we found your family name. It is your village, isn't it?"

"There are many tales about most names on Crete."

"Was there one about an English woman and a love affair?"

"English women are always falling in love with Greeks. Look at it now. All of us stalked by a bunch of Shirley Valentines. We've even

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got the German, Dutch, and Scandinavian versions on the prowl."

"And what about red silk panties? Beautifully embroidered with a two-tailed mermaid. There was a pair laid flat between two sheets of tissue paper. 'These cost my mother her life,' was something Marietta got told many times by her mother."

I give a nonchalant shrug, though my head feels as heavy as an olive root, and my heart softer than Cretan honey. "Maybe," I whisper, "the man's real wife gave them to her at some time. Excuse me for saying this, but she would have been considered a whore. It is a Cretan way of telling her so. The name of the creature is Gorgona and she is the symbol for a loose woman."

I can see that he does not believe me and is struggling to find another line of attack when Marietta arrives. She appears more Greek than ever now and is wearing—I still cannot help but notice—the latest fashion worn by some of the prettiest devils in Chania: three-quarter-length skintight trousers, high heels, and a strapless top that forces her perfect breasts up into your vision like some mirage you would risk crossing any desert to reach. I sense how easy or natural it is for her to become assimilated to this place. Maybe, also, how necessary. I begin to understand that she is owed something. But how much? I watch the Germans and English "artists" making faces and passing sly remarks about her—disapproving ones, I guess, about her appearance and probably her morals, too. I make my decision.

"Tomorrow evening, if you have no plans, I would like to invite you to visit my country retreat. You have found the village and guessed I come from there. So what is left but to welcome you to it properly? We will, if you want, eat and drink something together."

Marietta places a long bare arm around her husband's shoulders and they leave after accepting my offer.

I watch their car arriving from my roof terrace, where I have been preparing the table. Though I spend a lot of time away and do not come to my village as often as I'd like, its patterns remain unchanging. Most cars are either recognized, or know exactly where they are heading: usually straight through this place as they search for the next village with its rumoured lost acropolis. This car is slowing down and the people inside are seeking someone; I know they are my guests. I see the 4x4 stop at the tin shed which is our *kafenion,* garage, and general store. The men sit out drinking and the women are at their eternal lacework: They will not tell the strangers where I live.

I let them drive by the hidden entrance to my house: they will not get too far before the only road sign not yet totally obliterated by bullet holes will announce that they have left the village. But it will give me a little more time, and by their return I will be at the bottom of the slope waiting. I've worked most of the day, tidying the

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house, preparing some food, picking a token for them to take. Though mainly trying to decide what I should tell them.

I have never brought foreigners to my family home before and am both excited and nervous. After all my years of serving tourists, this feels like the first genuine offer of hospitality and I know my intentions are for the right reason.

They arrive and I rush out to greet them. And already want to be evasive. I show the cross carved into the stone of a Venetian arch; I encourage them to look down into the depths of my glass-covered well; and for their hands to touch the shattered fragments of the stone oven. "It broke the day my father died," I explain. "It is one of our many superstitions: When the owner dies, the oven crumbles before it can be used again, and must be rebuilt. You may not believe it, but this is Crete and many unbelievable things happen."

Neither of them ask how many times this one has broken and why I have not bothered to repair it. I sense they are listening but not really interested. I stop the tour and put the flowers they have brought for the table in some water while they open their gift. It is an icon for their wall when they return home. My saint to watch over them. I resist suggesting they should hang it over their bed and try not to imagine his bony finger trembling in disapproval above their sweating bodies.

Marietta tells me that she loves the house. "It's just so romantic," she says. "Did your wife love it when you were young and here together?"

I take her hand and lead her to the table. How to explain that words like love and romance are not what we had in this place: Instead, it was all family, duty, and work. "Take a look," I want to say, "come here and stay for some time. See how old all the people are who remain. How they move in rhythm with the beasts, the olives, and grapes. And most of all the cycle that is Crete."

Richard fingers one of the antique guns I have hanging on the walls. I see he knows weapons and is gentle and almost reverent about this one, as if he realizes how many lives it has ended.

I serve them a salad with wild greens and capers, some of my olives, bread, of course, my aunt's mizithra cheese, and her delicious pies. We drink new wine from the barrel dripping slowly under my stairs. I want to keep it light and tell them, "The priest only blessed the barrel last month—and drank about half of it for his trouble!" We make small-talk and I note how little they are drinking. Afterwards, we sit on the roof terrace with a glass of my rare tsikoudia made from mulberries, under the stars, with the village lullaby of cicadas, owls, the constant yapping of roped dogs, mating cats, and a demented cockerel crowing six hours early.

"Look at all the abandoned, crumbling houses," I say, "only fit for the agents to try and sell for tourists' dreams. There are no young people here now. *This* village is dying." Then, because it is time, I

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add, "It does not need to be tortured along the way for its past sins." I know this is the opening and wait.

"I was just thinking about the man," Richard says, "the one who took his shard of mirror and shone it into all those dark places. And through his actions, how hope was born."

As he says this, Marietta opens a locket hanging around her neck. On one side it has a picture of a woman, on the other there is an empty, polished mirror of gold. I do not need to take a second glance at the woman. Marietta catches a beam of light from a wall spotlight and lets it shine down over the village and into some of the derelict houses, slowly and trembling, until it returns and touches both my eyes and holds there.

"I will tell you all I know," I say. "There was at some time an English woman who came here. According to rumour—and we are the masters of mythology—she was just passing through when one of the men in the village met her and fell in love. He may have been either an idiot or a great kapetanios. Whatever, he was married, with a child and many relatives, but this did not matter. Against everyone's wishes they set up a home on the fringe of the village. This new woman would not have been trusted or accepted. She would have been hated for what she was doing with a Cretan man and to his family. It is possible they had a child. But the war came. The Battle of Crete was bloody. All battles for Crete are bloody. Kazantzakis wrote: 'Dig a spade into the earth anywhere on Crete and you will turn up blood.' But this was terrible. The cemeteries resembled those in France after the First World War. At one stage the Germans used gliders and paratroopers to try and take the island. My father told me the Resistance shot them from the sky as they floated down. Killing them was not the trouble: Counting how many dead was the biggest problem! Hitler's crack airborne division was effectively wiped out. But then he unleashed the full force of his anger upon our island.

"After that the Germans took the airfield and victory was inevitable. Most of the Cretan men still alive fled to the mountains and formed the Resistance—to fight and get the Allied soldiers to safety. The idiot or kapetanios, from what I can find out, was killed. I could never discover anything more about the woman. Nothing. All of his remaining family deny that she ever existed. That it is lies made up by their enemies. They will show you a photograph of him lying in his coffin, surrounded by flowers, with his wife seated next to him."

They both keep staring down into the village while I speak. A gun goes off, a heavy-calibre pistol. Then another, this time a machine gun. It's usual around here for this time of night but I am surprised that neither of them flinches.

Marietta snaps the locket closed with a noise louder than any of the shots.

"My mother is dying," she tells me. "She wanted so badly to know

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what happened to her mother and father. Who sent her back to England? What was the significance of those red panties? I am going back with no more than I came here with."

"Let us be romantic," I say. "Imagine that she sent her daughter home to some chance of safety at the start of the war, and went up in the hills with her lover to fight for freedom. There are many, many unmarked graves all over Crete. Maybe they died together. What matters about how it happened? Nothing will bring her back."

I see the loneliness and loss in her eyes that this inspires and wish I had not said it. I decide to risk a little more that might take some of the hurt away. "Look," I say, "when the German paratroopers were killed, the Cretans used to take the parachutes and the women used the white silk for making dresses and shirts. We produce fine white silk on the island, so they were never sure where it came from. Then they started using bright red silk in their parachutes and announced that anyone caught wearing this material would be hanged. To defy them, the women made underwear from it. You might picture the washing lines at night—dripping in scarlet silk, drying colourless in the cold moonlit night."

I give them a glass more of iced tsikoudia and lead them indoors.

"I might return to this village," Richard says, "rent one of these houses for a couple of months and stay while they light the kazani. We'll make certain our Greek is better and do a bit of research ourselves."

"There is nothing more," I assure him. "You will not get anything out of his family or their neighbours except scorn. It is an insult to them and they will take offence."

Marietta goes to the bathroom and he looks at me, man to man.

"I know something," he says. "Those panties were not just given to insult her grandmother for her love. They were given to her so the Germans had an excuse to execute her. And you know it. How deep can such hatreds go? To betrayal and revenge, even when there were bigger enemies and threats all around?"

His wife comes back and he says it is time to leave. I offer them a bed for the night while wishing they would go. He shakes my hand firmly and she brushes my cheeks with a light kiss. They keep burning as I watch her leave and know it is the last time we'll meet. He will not bring her back to this place. He has seen enough. As I hear the car drive off, I take a photograph from its hiding place and look at them for the first time in over a decade. She is as beautiful as her granddaughter. My heroic father, not idiot, but the great kapetanios, is as handsome and proud as any lover of this woman would be.

I stand at the window and look at the car winding its way down through the gorge. And I swear, as I hold the photograph, a flash of golden light from their rear windscreen hits it and bathes their two faces with its warmth. I place it back in its darkness and go to put some roses on a hidden grave before another cold dawn arrives. ●

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Murder on the Main Line

by Meredith Anthony

Bitsy Ross Banks was so astonished that she did the unthinkable—she actually moved. She was so overwhelmed with a combination of shock and pure joy that she gave a sharp intake of breath, raised her head a few inches off the pillow, and flexed her right foot. For a woman of Bitsy's massive size, this constituted a virtually aerobic activity. Bitsy fell back, a little exhausted, although still consumed with glee. She tapped the control that raised her head, the better to listen.

Her new radio had amazed her. The radio that she had requested and which her clever daughter-in-law had, with her usual alacrity, supplied, did not just receive AM, FM, and the all-important police band. It also picked up her upstairs neighbor's phone calls with astonishing clarity.

Bitsy was invigorated with a sense, both immediate and well-elaborated, of the possibilities. This would be fun. She could spy on her friends from the comfort of her own bed. What could be more delicious?

Bitsy listened, rapt, to her dear little Luke, the charming young divinity student on the second floor whom she had christened Luke the Prophet. He made a date to meet a boy from school named Aaron at a pizza place near campus at eight that night, after Luke had spent his usual two hours in the library. It was a perfectly mundane social transaction, over in a minute, but Bitsy beamed with a sense of secret knowledge, a rare possibility of adventure.

New Yorker Meredith Anthony was at Bouchercon 2005 with her husband, author Lawrence Light, when she was inspired to write her first mystery short story. Her previous writing was primarily humor—for *Mad* magazine and similar venues. That first crime story, "Murder at the Butt End of Nowhere," appeared in our Department of First Stories. She returns this month with another sharply observant but humorous tale of murder. †

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Bitsy hadn't left her apartment in nearly two years, except for one devastating trip to the hospital by ambulance. She had had to endure a wait while the paramedics called for reinforcements and finally accepted help from a truck full of firefighters just to carry her down the steps from her porch to street level. It had been mortifying—so many neighbors had come out to gawk. She had carried it off regally, of course. That was her style. Waving her hand with the back and forth motion popularized by Queen Elizabeth, or maybe the Queen Mum. Calling out weakly, "It's all right. Her Majesty just needs a little outing." Making a joke of it. Laughing along with them. Bitsy was well aware of her size and the astonishment that she occasioned.

In previous years, when she had still been able, she had held court on the porch in the fair weather, comfy in the reinforced white wicker armchair, a cool vodka drink in her oversized hand. Usually a couple of the young residents of the building joined her and she made them drinks and told them stories. She cultivated them and they indulged her, at first out of a sense of duty, then for sheer enjoyment. Bitsy was practiced in the art of entertainment—it was her currency. The favors, the chores, the errands they did were payment for her services. If the ability to charm the young people was her work, it was also her pleasure. And of all the young faces that had passed through this building and through her porch soirees, none had she ever treasured as she did Luke. She almost vibrated with anticipation.

Later, when Luke stuck his head in her door to ask if she needed anything, as he did every evening, Bitsy could coyly mention that what she needed was a friend to have dinner with—a friend like Aaron. How startled Luke would be. Then how they would laugh. Bitsy snuggled contentedly under the covers, a tiny wiggle that barely rippled through her great bulk like an orgasm in an elephant, a tiny frisson, soon forgotten.

She reached out and tuned the radio again to the police band. Then, too distracted by the implications of her new good fortune, she tuned it instead to a talk radio program so dull that she didn't need to concentrate on it.

After an eternity of talk radio, punctuated by police reports on Maury Ludlawn's youngest caught in yet another DUI, she heard Luke's steps clattering down the stairs. Bitsy reached over and clicked off the radio, then smoothed the covers over her great bulk, composing herself for a visit. She was going to have fun.

Then, his knock at the door, the familiar three quick knocks followed by a pause, then a single knock—their code—as though Bitsy didn't know his steps on the stairs.

She answered with a cheery, "Come in, dear."

Only then did he stick his head through the door, which was

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never locked. How would she answer the door?

"Bitsy, I'm off to my labors at the library. Anything you need? I can run to the store and back before I go."

"You are sweet. I don't need a thing." She beamed at him.

He nodded and started to close the door.

"Luke," she said, smiling. Just an afterthought.

"Sure. Anything, Bitsy."

"Maybe we could have dinner later. Some hoagies from Ditmar's. After the library. My treat." She continued to smile benignly.

"Gee, no. I'm sorry. Not tonight, Bitsy. I have a lot to do. My advisor gave me a deadline. I'll probably grab something from a vending machine and keep on working."

One of the advantages of being very fat, Bitsy realized, was that her reflexes were slow and her features, buried in blubber, weren't very expressive. The slight lift of her eyebrows when Luke told this lie didn't even register on her face.

"No problem, dear. I have my Hell on Wheels. And my trusty salt shaker and my pepper sauce to make it palatable. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Okay. But I don't like you using all that salt. They make Meals on Wheels bland for a reason. Bland is good for you."

"If bland was good for me, I'd be friends with poor plain Jane in two-B instead of you, my love."

"Oh, you. And her name's Jean. And she's very nice."

"Well, it's plain Jean, then. You go have fun."

" 'Night, Bitsy. I'll come by tomorrow with coffee and McNuggets. How's that sound?"

"Salty and delicious. You're a dear. 'Night, Luke."

The door closed and Bitsy's smile faded. Now why had Luke lied about his dinner plans?

Bitsy was capable of moving, of course, at least a little. She just didn't like to. She tried to keep it to a minimum—putting her hand out to tune the radio or find the remote. She could leaf through magazines and catalogs, seldom actually reading unless the print was large, but scanning the photos and ads with great, greedy interest. Bitsy could use the phone, particularly now that her clever daughter-in-law had brought her one with big, lighted buttons. And she could still get out of bed and use the potty chair, sort of, although it took forever. It was best to wait until she had help. Even with the trapeze bar hanging overhead to pull herself up, it was a struggle to swing her legs over the side of the bed and haul herself upright, first sitting, then standing. Her arms sometimes gave out before she made it and she had to drop back and start all over. Since the visiting nurse, the home health aide, the social worker, and the girl her son had hired to do errands were each around only sporadically, Bitsy had taken to wearing adult diapers.

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Her son and her clever daughter-in-law had been quite stern on this topic of Bitsy's mobility. As long as she could get up and go to the pot, she could continue to live alone, they said. When she couldn't, they'd have to make other arrangements. This last was always added ominously, although her clever daughter-in-law always patted her arm reassuringly as the dread message was delivered.

Bitsy appreciated her clever daughter-in-law, but this was definitely the downside, Bitsy thought with a sigh. It was the only thing they ever disagreed on and the only thing that might cause an unpleasant rift. Bitsy hated unpleasantness. But damned if she was going to live out her last days in a nursing home. She was fine right here, thank you very much. Bitsy intended to remain in her beloved apartment, in her beloved suburb, on her beloved Main Line.

Bitsy was more than a match for her clever daughter-in-law. She always would be. Jumped-up little parvenu. Cold little bitch. Trying to outsmart Bitsy with her fake smiles and her ugly ultimatums. A perfect match for her cold, nasty, unfeeling son. Always blaming Bitsy for losing the family money. For being fat. For being needy. Now Bitsy was getting excited. Bitsy was starting to hyperventilate, her great face as big and round as a dinner plate—bigger—a big red charger from a properly set table at a dinner party long ago. Just the thought of a proper dinner party calmed Bitsy. She began to relax.

After all, no need to think about anything unpleasant. No need at all. Bitsy would think about Luke. Luke the Prophet. Or about her other young friends who rented cheap apartments while they finished school or their first year at their starter jobs. They liked the idea of living on the fabled Main Line even if it was in an old rundown mansion that had been cut up into tiny studio or one-bedroom apartments. And part of the experience was a chance to get to know Bitsy.

Her landlord, David, always brought prospective tenants to see Bitsy before he closed the deal. He used Bitsy's apartment as a showcase, with her treasures all around her—the few best pieces she had been able to keep from what she thought of as her former life—the marble-topped table, the ormolu desk, the Louis armchairs, the enormous silver candelabra with its spindly scrolling arms.

"Oh, don't look," she'd plead in mock horror. "I'm not at my best. I'm just camping out."

But they did look. And dream. As if the pathetic, damp, dreaming youngsters had a prayer of developing a personal style for years, even if they had the money, which they didn't. But seeing her glory, even crammed into the tiny rooms, seemed to make them think that their IKEA bookcases and Pottery Barn housewares could mysteriously morph, inside these walls, into a picture of elegant

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living far beyond their financial and aesthetic reach.

"Don't look at me," Bitsy would beg, disingenuously. "I'm just a Main Line bag lady." Or, if they looked the slightest bit intellectual, she'd say, "Orson Welles in drag." Or, "the Bryn Mawr buddha." She could tell by whether they laughed, and how much, if they were material she could work with. David only rented to the ones who passed.

In return, David made them understand that while Bitsy's body was infirm, her mind was sharp and she had a wealth of stories and observations, some scandalous, most funny, to impart to those who had the good fortune to get to know her.

The arrangement was a good one for all concerned. As her clever daughter-in-law called it, it was a win-win-win. David got good tenants. Bitsy got companionship and errands done, and the young people—the ones who were bright enough to seize the opportunity—got an education, or at least an exposure to the world according to Bitsy. And Bitsy, as her clever daughter-in-law put it, was a true American original.

So Bitsy encouraged the boys to wear dress shirts and ties—not because it was proper, she assured them, but because it set them apart, got them respect, higher grades, even. Even with jeans, a starched shirt and tie lent an air of raffish, scholarly accomplishment. And pink shirts. The mark of a true prep-school boy. A Main Line boy. It attracted chicks, she assured them. And it did. By the boatload. There was no telling how many boys found and bedded and married girls above their station. How many got promoted to management way before their peers.

And for the girls, headbands and pearls. Even with jeans. And she had them cut the crusts off their sandwiches and cross their legs only at the ankles. She had seen several go off to marry lawyers, corporate vice presidents, brokers even. Headbands and pearls.

Luke called it Bitsy's finishing school. Bitsy called it her finished school.

Bitsy was finished, in a way, and she knew it. Her feckless husband, whom she only ever referred to as Our Hero, had come from an old Philadelphia family with no money. Bitsy's even more aristocratic parents—they went back to Betsy Ross and beyond—had objected to the match. But Bitsy shrugged. She had enough money for both of them, she had said blithely. But she didn't. Not forever. There were hints of trouble from the beginning, but Bitsy didn't see them. Bitsy's inheritance was pretty much gone after Our Hero had drunk his way through one corporate sinecure after another until no one would hire him.

He dried out several times at Chit Chat, the fashionable rehab center, but it never took. And as Our Hero drank, Bitsy, never really svelte, began to eat. She would have steak and potatoes at the

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Merion Cricket Club, then—they always took two cars since Our Hero wanted to spend time at the bar—she'd stop at McDonald's or Burger King or Wendy's on the way home. As Our Hero got pickled, Bitsy got fat. And the money just flew out the window until they lost everything: the enormous house, the live-in help, the clubs, the prep school, the bespoke suits and handmade shoes, the travel to Europe for couture to drape Bitsy's ever-expanding figure.

Their son had to go to a Little Ivy instead of Yale or Dartmouth, and he worked at night to pay for it. He rarely came home. He was a cold fish, judgmental. He seemed to imply that he knew all along they would fail him.

Bitsy stayed home, mostly in bed, getting ever fatter. After a while, her lungs couldn't support the weight and she developed emphysema, adding another excuse to stay in bed, tethered to an oxygen tank by long flexible tubing that ran to a clip stuck on her nose. The fatter she got, the less mobility she had, along with an unending spiral of medical problems, some real, some imagined. Her blood sugar soared into full-blown diabetes, her heart enlarged and struggled. She barely noticed when Our Hero moved out, to live with an alcoholic widow he met in a bar. It wasn't a year before he was found dead in a cheap motel surrounded by plastic half-gallon bottles of cheap vodka, most of them empty.

Now in a tiny apartment on the wrong side of Lancaster Avenue, Bitsy lived on Social Security, a subsidy from her cold fish of a son, who had turned out to do quite nicely for himself, and all the aid her clever daughter-in-law could squeeze out of the social service system—a visiting nurse, a social worker, a home health aide, Meals on Wheels, and a doctor on call provided by a hospice.

Bitsy had lost her money, her figure, much of her hair, her health, and her social standing. She never lost her pride or her sense of humor. She had excellent eyesight, perfect skin, good teeth, and a wickedly original outlook. She was also patient, able to wait for hours between visits from one of the kids in the house or one of the social services people who came by on irregular schedules. So she was capable of waiting for Luke with the calm assurance of a frog on a lily pad awaiting a tasty fly, her sticky tongue ready to strike.

In any event, Diane, the beautiful, insecure Eagles cheerleader, rescued Bitsy from her Hell on Wheels. Princess Diana, as Bitsy called her, was blond, lovely, and neurotic. She was the most needy young woman Bitsy had ever met. She gave her characteristic knock—four, pause, three, mimicking a well-known football cheer—and stuck her head in the door while Bitsy was still pondering Luke's strange behavior.

"I stopped at Wendy's after practice," she said tentatively. "I thought maybe . . ."

"Wendy's! The queen loves Wendy's. And she loves her princess.

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Come in, child."

"I'm sorry to come by in sweats," Diane apologized as she transferred the contents of the large bag to Bitsy's favorite lacquer tray. "I would have changed, but the food would've gotten cold."

"You're a vision, even without your pearls," Bitsy cooed, distracted by the aroma of the greasy meat patties and fries. "Careful of the oxygen tubing. I don't want you tripping and landing on me." Or, more important, spoiling a perfectly nice dinner, she added to herself.

Diane laughed musically.

They munched contentedly as Diane told Bitsy her fears about being cut from the squad, the pressure from her parents to go back to the Midwest, the tailback who wanted to take her out. Bitsy murmuring encouragement, bolstering her confidence, urging her to trust her instincts.

"Tailback. Why just the sound of it is nasty. You're right to turn him down, the dirty thing. Tailback."

They both hooted with laughter.

"Now why don't you find a nice man outside the world of professional football? Someone like our sweet little Luke the Prophet."

"Luke? First of all, he's going to be a priest or something. And second, he—I don't think he even likes girls all that much." Diane reddened prettily.

"Nonsense. What an idea. Hasn't he been helpful to you? Finding that nice armoire for your apartment? Helping you decorate? Your knight in shining armoire. He haggled the price down so much we almost renamed him Luke the Profit, remember?"

"Bitsy, there's a difference between a man you can shop with and one you can date. You know?"

Bitsy was so startled that she stopped eating for a second. She suddenly understood. Out of the mouths of babes, she thought, unable to resist a joke even when she had no one to share it with.

"So you're saying our Luke the Prophet is a little light in the loafers, dear?"

Diane laughed, a musical trill. "I never heard it put like that, but I think that is what I'm saying. Maybe. I'm not sure, you know. But he loves antiques, loves to shop, and wants to be a priest. You know?"

Bitsy knew.

The next morning as she stood, with difficulty, holding on to the grab bars in the walk-in shower as her home health aide loofahed her back, Bitsy considered the game. After she was bathed and clothed in fresh diapers and a beautiful, capacious white cotton nightdress with eyelet trim and a midnight-blue caftan robe, she sat in her wheelchair with a tray of tea and an Egg McMuffin. The aide changed the four-poster, canopied electric bed with freshly

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ironed high-thread-count Porthault linens.

"Ma'am, you know I ain't supposed to iron no linens. So don't you tell my supervisor or I'll catch hell. You're good to me and I don't mind, but don't you let on that I do that. And don't say nothing about no fast food, neither."

She nattered away and Bitsy made agreeable murmurs occasionally, but she wasn't listening. She was thinking.

By the time Luke came by, she was back in her bed, raised up to nearly a sitting position, looking both regal and mischievous all at once.

"Bitsy, you look lovely as always."

Bitsy simpered and preened. "Luke, you old flirt. They teach you that at divinity school, do they?"

"Why no, I learned it here at Bitsy's finishing school, my dear."

"Finished, more like." They laughed agreeably.

"In any case, you are divine, so you fit right in with the curriculum," he fairly purred.

"Go on, now," Bitsy cooed with pleasure. "So you're up there at the Pope Factory with all those devout little Catholic boys. That must be a bit boring, socially, although I guess it's good for the soul."

"Well, they're not all Catholic," Luke said. He lowered his voice to quote the catalog. "St. Joseph's makes a point to recruit men of different faiths to create a more enlightened spiritual environment."

"So they aren't all going to be priests, I take it?"

"No, some are going to teach religion or pursue other secular careers. I'm not entirely sure since I have the calling, you know."

Bitsy smiled at the word "calling."

"So you have Buddhist boys and Jewish boys and Druid boys and who knows what?" she asked coyly.

"Well, I don't know about the Druids, but yes, that's the general idea."

"You know, there didn't used to be any Jews on the Main Line at all. Then there were a few, but not what my mama called real Jewy Jews. Now I guess that's all changed."

Luke hesitated. "Well, you have to admit it's for the best, Bitsy. It was just too white bread, too exclusive. It wasn't healthy."

Bitsy nodded.

"And some of them are your friends, dear?" she ventured, hoping to draw him out about Aaron. Sure, he might say, I had a bite with a Jewish boy last night. We talked about St. Augustine. That would take care of the whole thing.

Luke gave a noncommittal shrug and stacked the lunch dishes on the tray and carried it across to the efficiency kitchen.

"I especially wanted to have lunch since I'm going to be putting in some late nights at the library. I have a huge paper to do and I didn't want you to feel neglected."

"You're a dear boy," Bitsy said warmly. Curiouser and curiouser.

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In the evening, Bitsy was watching TV and leafing through a spring fashion catalog when the radio, set very low, emitted the characteristic static that signaled a phone call upstairs. She dropped the catalog, muted the TV, and touched the radio dial. Instantly, Luke's voice came through clearly. She turned the volume up.

"Sure, tonight." (pause) "Well, we can come back here but we have to be really freaking quiet." (pause) "The fat old bitch downstairs hears everything."

The words hit Bitsy like a punch to the gut. Her eyes started to tear, but she kept listening.

"Well, I care. I have plans for the Main Line Mountain and I can't afford to alienate her, not even for some hot sex, you machine man, you."

Bitsy forgot her hurt feelings. This was interesting.

"No. You can't meet her, you idiot. For one thing, she hates Jews."

Bitsy wanted to protest. This wasn't true at all. Not at all.

"I'll meet you later. We'll come back here. You'll need to know your way around anyway."

Now, what could that mean?

Bitsy's hyperaware senses, as tuned as a cat's, were on full alert. But even so, she almost missed the arrival of Luke and presumably Aaron late that night.

She heard Aaron's strangled giggle and Luke's angry hiss when they were already halfway up the stairs to the second floor. How had Luke, with his clattering footsteps, become such a sneak?

She had left the TV on low. She had to. It would seem odd if she turned it off. And right now, Bitsy didn't want to do anything out of the ordinary. Her only advantage was that Luke didn't know she knew. But what? What did she know, really? Only that something was going on.

They were certainly quiet, although an hour or so later Bitsy's sharp ears detected a faint rhythmic squeaking. The bed, for sure. The man machine at work, no doubt. Bitsy was repelled by the idea of Luke having sex with a boy upstairs. It was disgusting. But as she listened, she began to regard it as faintly erotic. She flushed as she realized how long it had been since she had even thought of sex, really. Even though it was all over the TV shows and she constantly gave advice to her young friends about who they slept with, it never seemed to her to be really about sex—about the raw, animal, bed-squeaking rhythmic reality of it.

When the sounds from upstairs finally stopped, Bitsy drifted off to sleep. But she woke up to the certain knowledge that someone was in her room. She would have made a startled movement if she weren't so big. Luckily, her bulk absorbed the shock and she kept

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her eyes closed, her breathing even. She listened intently. The stealthy footsteps, the hushed breathing, right beside her. It was Luke. She was certain. Right beside her. And maybe Aaron, too. Looking at her. She gave an involuntary shudder, snorted a little breath to cover it up as sleep. What now? Were they going to kill her? Should she open her eyes? Scream? She risked another snort and moved a little, showing them she was asleep, but maybe waking up.

Sure enough, the footsteps retreated, the breathing receded. She heard the click of her door latch as it opened, then after a count of six, it clicked again as it softly closed. She heard soft steps outside her window, then muffled whispers, then silence. They were gone.

The next day, Bitsy's stomach hurt, probably from the stress. She had to bribe the home health aide to go back to McDonald's a second time for enough Egg McMuffins to settle her down.

She also needed time to think. She had already rejected the idea of calling the police. Where was the proof? An hysterical old woman saying she'd had a break-in. No evidence of anything missing. No forced entry. Nothing.

They had cased the place. She was sure. It was the only possible explanation. Luke, her Luke, damn him, was up to something. He was going to rob her of her treasures. Maybe blame Aaron if he was caught. Why else bring the boy into it? If they were discovered, if Bitsy woke and screamed, Luke could say he'd heard something and come to investigate. He'd be sure Bitsy would back him up, be grateful even. And anything Aaron said would just be his word against Luke and Bitsy. No one would believe him.

But why not rob her last night? The silver service, the expensive objets d'art were all right out in the open as always. Why not take them?

Unless—and here Bitsy struggled into a slightly more upright position on her mound of down pillows. Unless they planned to kill her and take everything. But how? Easy, a fake will. A letter to her darling Luke giving it all to him, saying her cold son and much too clever daughter-in-law had enough of their own. Saying Luke was more a son to her than Mr. Frosty ever was. And it was true, wasn't it? Or it had been true.

And how would Luke, her sweet Luke, kill her? Smother her with a pillow and hope it looked like a heart attack? Maybe no one would check, a woman her age and size and condition. Heart attack would be quite likely. Sudden. Or maybe a match to her oxygen tank? But no. Too many valuable antiques would go up in flames. God, she hated fire. It was one of the few ways to die that actively scared her. No, a quick poison? Or maybe an overdose of her own meds, some of them quite powerful enough to do the job?

Suddenly, Bitsy was so overcome with grief that she thought,

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sure. Go ahead. Why not get it over with, this dying? Why live in a world where her dearest Luke could betray her like that? Her sweet Luke, whom she loved.

But just as suddenly, an enormous, healing rage swept through Bitsy. Done in by a cheesy little divinity student. A larcenous little guttersnipe of a choirboy, and gay to boot. No, sir. Not Bitsy Ross Banks. Not by a long shot. She might be old, infirm, nearly immobile, half dead already, if it came to that. But she wasn't going to be murdered by some parvenu. And she did have one secret weapon. She knew.

Bitsy had always been a patient woman. Had to be. But this day ground by slowly, wearing on her nerves. She scolded the girl volunteer and nearly made her cry. She insulted the oxygen-tank delivery guy, who left shaking his head. She used to flirt with him and he was disappointed. Bitsy took a deep breath and chatted with Diane without hearing a word.

Finally, evening came. Luke's footsteps clattering down the stairs, his head stuck in the door, asking if he could do anything for her.

"No, dear. You go off to study. The world needs a good priest or two."

Luke laughed, plainly a little startled. Good. She wanted him a bit off-guard.

"Well, if there's nothing I can get you . . ."

"No, dear boy. Well, actually I do have to ask you something. But it will keep. You go to the library. We can talk tomorrow."

Luke opened the door wider and came in, as she knew he would.

"I'm not in a rush. I have all the time in the world for my Bitsy."

"Well, it's something a little odd. A little worrying. But I shouldn't disturb you with it. It's probably a prank of some sort. An unkind person's idea of a joke, really. No, you go on. I won't even worry you."

Luke sat down beside the bed and took her hand. Bitsy hoped it wasn't clammy, showing her nerves, but Luke didn't seem to notice. He stroked her hand absently.

"Of course you should tell me. If something happened to trouble you, I want to know."

"Well, I got a silly phone call from some boy named Aaron today. A nervous-sounding boy. All garbled, really. But he mentioned your name and said you were going to hurt me."

Luke pulled his hand away as if her touch had burned him. His face flared red. He took a minute to calm himself, she could see the effort in his dear features, the way he pursed his lips—so thin, such a mean little mouth. Funny, she'd never noticed.

"Oh dear. I've upset you," she said. "I was wrong to tell you, my dear boy."

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"No." It came out a little sharper than it should. "No," he started again, modulating his tone into one of concern. "I can't imagine why anyone would do such a thing. It must be a joke." He was buying time. She could almost see wheels turning behind his squinty little eyes.

"I'm sure you're right, dear. Probably someone who knows we're friends and is jealous. Or trying to get some money from me—as if I have any," she laughed.

He joined her, his chuckle a little strangled, forced.

"That's it. Someone jealous that we're friends. How mean."

She raised her hand a little and after a second he took it. This time his hand was the clammy one. Bitsy regarded him fondly. And waited.

"Well, that's all right then."

But he had a sudden thought. "But, Bitsy, what did you say?"

"Oh, I sent him packing with a brisk, 'Screw you.' Then I hung up. The idea. My Luke trying to hurt me. Gracious. I wouldn't give that creep the time of day."

They sat in silence for a while, Luke's mind racing, holding Bitsy's swollen hand, until she pulled it away in dismissal.

"Now you go off to study, my dear. And promise me you won't give this another thought. Promise?"

Poor Luke. She almost felt sorry for him, he was that distressed. And she had to chuckle to herself. This was only her opening salvo. Who knew what she'd dream up to torment Luke tomorrow.

Bitsy was half asleep, listening to Larry King and the low buzz of the police scanner, when it squawked to life beside her.

She recognized the code instantly. Someone had been killed. She pressed the button to raise her head higher and turned the volume up. This was unusual on the Main Line. Not that it was crime-free, by any means, but murder was a rarity.

Amid the garbled squawks and guttural mutterings and high-pitched system feedback, Bitsy heard something that chilled her blood. The location was St. Joe's. Body found in a wooded part of campus. A student. More squawks and squeals. ID says it's Aaron Lowenstein, a second-year divinity student. Stabbed. No witnesses. Money in his wallet. Not a robbery. Wound was arterial. APB on anyone suspicious, with bloody clothes.

Bitsy reached for her phone. Should have dialed instantly. But she had hesitated. Stunned. Could Luke have done this? Was she at fault? Both answers were yes, she knew. And how to explain that to the authorities?

But as it happened, she didn't have to. Her door was thrown open and Luke rushed in, his eyes wild, his pink shirt covered in Aaron Lowenstein's blood.

"Luke, dear. What is it? What's happened?"

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Her hand left the phone and moved to turn the volume down on the scanner which kept repeating ugly details, amid the hellish cacophony of squawks and squeals. Luke swatted her hand away, panting. Listened for a minute.

"You know what's happened. You already know."

She noticed the knife in his hand for the first time. Her heart stuttered. How ironic if little Luke got his wish and she had a heart attack right now. Her mind swam, then steadied. He was standing over her, panting, dripping blood on her linens, smelling of sweat and meat.

"Were you trying to save me from him, dear? Is that what happened? It is, isn't it? We'll tell the police he threatened me and you went to stop him."

His eyes shifted. She could see him thinking it over. A way out, that's what she'd offered him. A lifeline. Would he take it?

She watched him with apparent calm, waiting to see if he'd bought it. But his brow furrowed, his eyes narrowed. Her heart sank.

"He never called you," he snarled. "Aaron was telling the truth. He never called you." He started to raise the knife, when a new emotion seized him, a powerful wave of grief. "You made me kill him," he wailed. "It's your fault, you bitch. You made me kill him."

Bitsy had only one chance and she knew it. It was a long shot, but then the stakes were high and she had no hand. No hand at all. She grabbed the oxygen-line nose clip and, wrapping the tubing around her fist, gave a mighty yank.

Luke's feet were pulled out from under him by the loop of tubing and he fell, quickly and heavily, his head pounding on the floor like thunder, the knife clattering out of his hand.

Bitsy fought to free her fist of the tubing, poking the nose clip back into place and reaching for the phone. But she wasn't quick enough.

Luke was down, but not out. He groaned and lurched to his knees, swaying unsteadily as his hand scrabbled for the knife.

Bitsy knew with absolute certainty that she was going to die. She was out of options. She was out of ideas. Except, suddenly, for one. She grabbed the trapeze bar overhead and, grunting with the effort, made her final play.

The police moved quietly around the crime scene, talking in low tones.

Back in bed, bruised, short of breath, Bitsy sipped tea and nibbled the packaged cookies that a policewoman had thoughtfully provided. Bitsy usually disdained everything but Pepperidge Farm, but now she believed that there was nothing on earth as nice as pedestrian old Nutter Butters.

Normally, they would have taken her to another room, or even the hospital, while the forensic team did their jobs, but given Bitsy's weight and condition, they just fed her tea and cookies and

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let her watch while they worked.

It was the best part of an hour before they removed poor little Luke, what was left of him. Luke the Prophet.

Finally, all of the police left except the detective in charge. Diane was allowed to come in then, and held Bitsy's hand and cried prettily. She murmured comfort as the detective tried to ask Bitsy questions.

Bitsy barely had to answer, watching with interest while they pieced things together themselves. Yes, Luke was a dear friend. Yes, he had stormed in, covered in blood. Yes, he was confessing his dreadful sin to Bitsy, on his knees by her bed, when he got tangled in her tubing and pulled her over onto him. Poor boy. She felt dreadful, crushing him like that. If only she had been well enough, strong enough not to fall. She was nearly immobile, just look at her. Bitsy smiled bravely and ate another cookie.

Diane was invaluable. She urged, no, demanded that the police not let out the details of how Luke died. He fell and hit his head and died. It happened, she added slyly, just as the brave police tracked him to the house and burst in to capture him.

After all, she reminded the detective, it would look better for the police to be the heroes, and there was no reason to embarrass a large woman who deserved her dignity. Diane told him that Bitsy's son was always threatening to put her in a home. No use giving him more ammunition.

The detective assented, smiling wryly at Bitsy. "Looks to me like Ms. Banks here can take care of herself just fine."

Bitsy's heart swelled with pride. She had never seen Princess Diana so assertive or look so pretty. The wry detective, particularly, seemed to notice. He said he had a few more questions. Asked if he could go over the case with Diane again tomorrow night. Over dinner? Diane turned to Bitsy.

Bitsy sighed. She had better plans for Diane than a simple policeman, but maybe she was overreaching. Diane watched her, blushing, waiting for a signal. She nodded slightly. Diane accepted the date radiantly.

Bitsy waited patiently for them all to go. She reassured Diane that she just wanted to be alone, to sleep. Bitsy actually wanted to be alone to mourn.

She would miss Luke the Prophet, more than she could say. She was genuinely sorry. She regretted that he was dead, even though he'd betrayed her friendship, tried to kill her. She regretted that she herself had had to kill him. And more than anything, she regretted, oh, how much, the time—filled with the ever diminishing squirming movement beneath her, filled with whispered pleading, then gasps, then gargles, and finally a horrible, guttural, rattling sound—she regretted the long, long time it had taken Luke to die. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

THE SONNETS OF SEPTEMBER

by Doug Allyn

The corridor was filled with a flood of chattering college students, jostling and joking with each other as they poured through the halls between classes, arguing, yelling hellos, young voices ringing off the tiled walls. Too many voices. Too loud. Pressing the remote-control button on his belt pack, Kevin dialed down the volume on his hearing aids, muting the hallway din to a bearable roar.

Much better. Checking his class schedule, he let the human wave sweep him along the corridor to room 187. Journalism 101.

Inside the door, he paused, frowning. It didn't look much like a classroom. No desks, no chalkboard. A long bank of PC computers lined one wall and three larger tables were spaced about the room, each with its own flat-screen monitor. Students were clustered around the tables, working on newspaper layouts.

Nobody seemed to be in charge. Taking a book out of his back-

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pack, Kevin glanced at the photo on the back cover, then scanned the faces in the room again.

A slim girl hurried over. A pretty girl, brightly tinted red hair, freckled nose, green eyes. Green midi blouse over black capri pants.

"Right book, wrong era," she said, signing as she spoke.

"What?"

"*The Sonnets of September* was Dr. Devlin's first book, but that picture's fifteen years out of date. I'm Dina Cohen, her assistant. Can I help you?"

"I'm Kevin McKay. Is this Dr. Devlin's journalism class?"

"Yes, but it's not a hearing-impaired class."

"Then why are you waving your hands around?"

"To help you understand," she said, folding her arms, annoyed. "I noticed your hearing aids and from your diction, I assume you're hearing impaired."

"I had cochlear surgery last year, I hear better now. Where's Dr. Devlin?"

"I have no idea," Dina said impatiently. "This isn't a normal class with lectures and exams. We assemble the college paper here, twice a week. Claire sticks her nose in now and again, but mostly the inmates run the asylum."

"Inmates?"

"Students," Dina said, gesturing around the room. "I'm the TA, the teaching assistant in charge, and since we're on deadline for tomorrow's *Westover Wildcat,* I'm a little short on time."

"Okay, what should I do?"

"That's my point. No offense, Kevin, but your pronunciation is so rough I can't assign you to the job we give newbie students, selling advertising."

"That guy has hearing aids," Kev said, indicating a student hunched over a computer terminal.

"He's Jake Schmidt, our resident geek genius. Are you a computer whiz?"

"No, but I've done some writing. I've had some articles and a short story published."

"In your high-school paper?" she asked, unimpressed.

"I didn't go to high school, exactly. Got my diploma GED."

In 2007 Doug Allyn once again finished in the winner's circle for the *EQMM* Readers Award with the (so far) non-series story "Stone Cold Christmas." For his second appearance in this magazine in 2008 he's contributed another non-series tale, this time at novella length. We've got more atmospheric pieces by the Michigan author in the lineup for upcoming issues, one of them in his popular Valhalla series. ✝

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"Look, Mr. McKay, no offense, but I don't think you're quite ready for this class. Take a semester of speech therapy, then reapply. We have a full slate of feature writers and every wannabe poet in Westover is hoping we'll run their masterpieces so they can see their names in print—"

"I've seen my name in print," Kevin said stubbornly. "Two articles in *The New Yorker,* another in *Atlantic Monthly,* plus a short story in *Ellery Queen.*"

Dina hesitated, staring at him. "Those would be impressive credentials if . . . no offense, but those magazines don't publish pieces by students."

"Why do you even bother?" Kevin asked.

"Bother what?"

"Saying no offense, just before you insult somebody. Look, I took some writing courses online. One of my profs submitted some pieces to national magazines and they bought them. I know my diction's rough, I came to Westover to improve it. I also came to work on my writing. With Dr. Devlin, not in some punk-ass asylum run by inmates. No offense."

"None taken," Dina said, flushing. "But why would a hotshot published author like yourself want to write for a punk-ass college paper anyway?"

"Selling a few pieces doesn't make me Hemingway. I've got a lot to learn, my tuition's paid up, and here I am. So?"

The room had fallen stone silent, curious faces turning toward the argument.

"Tell you what, Mr. McKay," Dina said, visibly controlling her temper. "I'll check *The New Yorker* for your work. *If* it's really there, I'll find something for you. Meantime, write me a short essay for tomorrow's issue, say . . . punk-ass little Westover College seen through the eyes of a hotshot author."

"I told you, I'm not—"

"Have it on my desk tomorrow morning, Mr. McKay. Or take a hike."

"You'll have it. Thankth for all your help."

"It's pronounced thanks. You need work on your esses, Mr. McKay."

Kevin stalked out without bothering to reply.

"What was all that?" Jake Schmidt asked, glancing up from his keyboard.

"I'm not sure. Punch up the library files for back issues of *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic.* See if they list an author named Kevin McKay."

"Who's Kevin McKay?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be asking you!" Dina snapped. "Check him out!"

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Outside, Kev looked up and down the empty halls, trying to remember the way to the student lounge. A door adjoining the journalism classroom was marked Office. He tried the knob. It wasn't locked. Easing the door open, he edged in.

A slender woman was seated at a desk beneath a window, grading papers in the golden autumn light. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight chignon, reading glasses perched on her narrow nose. A black cardigan sweater draped over her shoulders.

"Dr. Devlin," Kevin said quietly.

"Can I help you?" she said without looking up.

"My name's Kevin McKay. Do you remember me?"

She peered at him over her half-glasses. Saw a young roughneck in a faded flannel shirt, jeans, and work boots. Working-class handsome, with a shaggy mop of sandy hair and a square jaw showing a three-day stubble. His boyish looks were marred by a jagged scar on his cheekbone, another at the corner of his mouth. And his eyes weren't boyish at all. Gray as arctic ice and just as cold. "Sorry," she said. "I deal with several hundred students a year and my memory isn't what it used to be. What can I do for you, Mr. . . . ?"

"McKay," he prompted, taking the seat facing her, placing a thin book of verse on her desk. "I was hoping you could autograph this for me."

"The Sonnets of September?" she said, smiling curiously. "My God, I haven't seen one of these in a while. Where did you find it? Flea market?"

"Online, at Amazon dot com. It's the last one they had."

"Any particular inscription?" she asked, opening the book.

"How about . . . all the best? And your name."

"Very well." Writing with practiced precision, she autographed the book and passed it back. And for a moment their hands touched, and their eyes met and locked, as they both held the slim volume.

"What?" she asked.

"I didn't mean to stare, but I've had this book awhile. It's . . . odd to see you in person."

"The cover photo is fifteen years and ten pounds ago," she said, smiling ruefully as she released the book. "Sorry if it's a disappointment. Anything else?"

"Actually, there is. We've never met, but you've seen my work. I took your creative-writing course two years ago. Online. My address then was 3000 Cooper Street. Jackson."

"Jackson Prison?" She blinked. He had her full attention now. "What did you say your name was?"

"Kevin McKay. I wrote a short story for your class called 'Widowmaker,' and a think piece, 'The Politics of Witchcraft.' You said I had potential."

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"I remember those pieces," she said, removing her glasses, looking at him more carefully now. "They were exceptional. I also remember thinking it was a pity. Because you were serving a ten-year sentence for . . . ?"

"Assault on a police officer. Don't worry, Doc, I didn't break out. The Court of Appeals reversed my conviction. I was severely hearing impaired at my trial, couldn't properly aid in my defense. Since I'd already served six years, the D.A. decided not to retry me."

"Lucky you. What do you want, Mr. McKay?"

Kevin took a deep breath. "It's . . . a bit complicated. Mostly, I came here to find you."

"Why?"

"Because of this book. *The Sonnets of September.*"

"What about it?"

"Your book . . . saved me. I was dying by inches in that hellhole. I only took your course to kill time. But I found I could actually write. When I read the *Sonnets,* they . . . opened a window to the world outside the bars and bayonet wire. And then you said I had potential and . . ." He broke off, reading her expression. "Sweet Jesus. You say that to all the cons, don't you?"

"I try to be as encouraging as possible," Claire said carefully. "But I do remember your work, Mr. McKay. It did show promise."

"That promise came true. I kept writing after I finished your course. Had plenty of time for it. I took more English classes online and one of the proctors submitted my work to national magazines. *The New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly* both bought articles. I even sold a short story to *Ellery Queen.*"

"The mystery magazine?"

"You said to write what you know. I know a bit about crime."

"I imagine you do. It's still quite an accomplishment."

"It would never have happened if I hadn't taken your course. And read the *Sonnets.*"

"Then . . . you're welcome."

"Don't blow me off, Doc," Kevin said, leaning in intently. "I'm dead serious. Selling those pieces earned me seed money to hire a new lawyer. She appealed my conviction, then found a grant to pay for my cochlear implants and my tuition here. If not for you, I'd still be deaf as a stone, staring at the walls in D-block."

"Maybe you should be. You said your conviction was overturned. You didn't say you were innocent."

"Does it matter? I was convicted, then un-convicted of the same crime, and already done the time, Doc. I figure I'm paid up, either way."

"Perhaps so. What is it you want from me?"

"Your help. As a writer, I'm like a chimp flying an airplane. People tell me I'm talented, but I know that's not enough. I need to

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learn how to get that plane in the air every time, and keep it there."

"That's a tall order."

"Good," Kevin said, drily. "Up to now, my life's been way too easy."

"Very well, Mr. McKay, I'll do what I can. That's what they pay me for. Anything else?"

"Maybe one small favor—"

"Let's get something straight," she interrupted. "I don't owe you any favors. I quit teaching in the prison system because most essays were rape fantasies or rants about their rotten childhoods. Half of the submissions were glued together with semen."

"I'm sorry you had a rough time, Doc. I'm not like that."

"Your work may have been exceptional, but you're not the first ex-convict who's come to Westover. None of the others lasted more than a few weeks."

"Probably couldn't deal with all the encouragement."

"Touché," Claire said, smiling in spite of herself. "Very well, what's the favor?"

"Anonymity. I have the chance for a fresh start here. No one knows I'm an ex-con. Except you."

"Under Michigan law, all parolees are required—"

"I'm not on parole. My conviction was tossed. Technically, those six lost years never happened. I'd like to keep it that way."

"Are you asking me to lie for you, Mr. McKay?"

"No. I'm only hoping you'll be . . . discreet."

She mulled it over a moment, reading his face. It wasn't a bad face. Even with the scars.

"Is something wrong, Doc?"

"I'm not sure. To be honest, when you were taking my class, I used to wonder about you. Your phrasing had an odd meter. I didn't know you were hearing impaired. I assumed you were African-American. I pictured you as a three hundred pound black man with a shaved head and gangster tattoos. You could be the boy next-door."

"Only if you live next to a jail, Doc. I've got the gang tats, scars that show and a lot more that don't. Earned every one of 'em, too. I'm twenty-three, but I haven't been a boy for a helluva long time."

"No, I suppose not. Very well, Mr. McKay, as long as you behave yourself, a little discretion about your background isn't too much to ask."

"Thanks, Doc," he said, rising to leave. "And thank you for the *Sonnets,* and for giving me my life back." He paused in the doorway. "By the way, I wasn't disappointed by your picture. It doesn't do you justice."

She didn't know what to say to that. So she said nothing.

He took a last long look before leaving. As if snapping a new

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photograph with those cold gray eyes.

After he'd gone, Claire picked up her phone and dialed Stella Rufalo, her boss and best friend.

"Hey, Stel, are you free? I have a . . . situation."

"Do you think he's dangerous?" Stella Rufalo asked.

"He must be, to have survived in that place," Claire Devlin said. "Jackson is one of the toughest prisons in the country. Have you ever seen it?"

"Not even a picture." Stella Rufalo was short and chubby with curly raven hair and mischievous eyes, a department head who favored flower-child serapes and sandals. Her private office was a floor above Claire's cubbyhole and far less Spartan, with an inlaid oak desk, wall-to-wall carpet, and drapes in Westover green and white. "Jackson's like a dungeon out of the Middle Ages," Claire said with a shiver. "I was only there twenty minutes to fill out my application to teach online and it scared hell out of me."

"And how long was this boy there?"

"Six years. And he's not a boy, exactly, he's twenty-three."

"You said there's something unnerving about him? Is he disfigured or—?"

"No, nothing like that. He wears hearing aids and has a few scars but he's actually quite handsome, I suppose, in a blue-collar way. He's just so . . . intense. And extremely bright."

"This is a university, Claire. Intelligence isn't a negative."

"John Dillinger was intelligent, Stel. So was Caligula."

"Do you think this McKay is a threat to other students? Or to you?"

"Not to me, he thinks I saved his life."

"Okaaay . . . you have a gifted, good-looking student with a colorful background who thinks you're the cat's meow. What was your problem again?"

"You're useless," Claire sighed.

"I certainly am," Stella said proudly. "That's why tenure's such a marvelous invention. Will you be at the poetry slam at Shannon's next Thursday?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Dina Cohen's going to recite a new piece."

"Good, we can go together. Was there anything else, Doctor?"

"Read this aloud, please," Mrs. Hockett said. The speech therapist was sixtyish, with a halo of frizzy white hair, stout as a barrel in a flowered print dress. They were alone in her office. She listened intently as Kevin struggled with the words.

"How did you suffer your hearing loss?"

"Concussion. Got my skull fractured with a baseball bat when I was ten."

"Baseball's a rough game."

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"I wouldn't know. I've never played it."

"In any case, with your implants and hearing aids, you've made remarkable progress, Mr. McKay."

"So I've been told. What's the bad news?"

"You have some articulation gaps, difficulties with word endings like *ed, ing*, and *ess*, but since your hearing loss was post lingual, your pronunciation's generally quite good. Did you bring your medical records with you?"

"No, I . . . misplaced them. Why?"

"I wanted to compare your auditory closure rate before and after surgery. Do you read a lot?"

"All the time."

"Thought so." Mrs. Hockett nodded, smiling. "You pronounce some words like a foreigner who's never heard them spoken . . ." She frowned, scanning his folder. "Is this right? You're twenty-three?"

Kevin nodded.

"You lost your hearing at ten, but didn't get corrective surgery until last year? Why not?"

"No money. So? What's the prognosis?"

"Overall, very good news. I'd peg your auditory closure rate at roughly eighty percent and rising. Your articulation problems are largely superficial. In plain English, Kevin, work with me for a semester and most people won't know you were ever impaired."

"Is that straight up? Or just a pep talk?"

"Sometimes it's a pep talk," she admitted. "Not today. I imagine your life's been quite difficult up to now. But if you apply yourself here at Westover, it's going to get a lot better. How's that for straight up?"

History of Western Civ. was a pure pleasure. The prof was a sawed-off Greek who loved his subject and made it fun. Sociology 101 was drier but bearable.

Phys Ed was Kev's last class of the afternoon. He found the gym, then followed the signs down the tiled stairs to the locker room. Pushed through the door—and froze.

A dozen guys were at their lockers in various states of undress. Some were seriously muscled up, iron pumpers. But there were no gang tattoos.

"You lost?" a tall guy asked. Six-four, crew cut, blond as a Nazi recruiting poster. Looked like Tab Hunter's tougher brother.

"He's got hearing aids, Russ," somebody said. "Speak up."

"Hey! Buddy!" Russ yelled, grinning. "Are! You! Lost?" A few guys laughed.

"I'm looking for the coach of the cross-country team?"

"Down the hall, second door on the left," Russ said. "You coming out for the team?"

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"Maybe."

The laughter trailed off. The others were checking him out now.

"If you do, just remember we're a team," Russ said, with an edge to his tone. "We run together. Got that?"

"Sure," Kevin said, turning away.

Closing the door behind him, he leaned against it a moment, cooling himself down. Too many guys, too close. But they weren't a cellblock gang. Just college boys. Big ones, though.

Taking a deep breath, he rapped on the second door and stepped in cautiously. A woman was sitting behind a battered steel desk, wearing a teal Westover T-shirt with a whistle around her neck. Coarse brown hair cropped boyishly short, square, open face.

"I'm looking for Coach Levy?"

"You've found her. I'm Joan Levy. What's up?"

"I'm a transfer student, Kevin McKay. The course catalog says I can run cross country for my phys-ed credits."

"Are you a basketball player, McKay?"

"No. Why?"

"Up until this semester, the cross-country team basically served as a conditioning squad to get round-ballers ready for the season. Most of the guys on the team are ballplayers."

"I just want to run."

"What kind of times did you chart in high school?"

"I didn't run in high school, but I've been running ten kilometers a day for . . . the past few years. My time's around thirty minutes."

Her eyebrows arched. "Not world class, but respectable. We're getting ready to practice. Suit up, and we'll give you a workout."

"I don't have any duds."

"Try the lost-and-found box in the corner. Something's bound to fit. What size shoes do you wear?"

"I don't," Kevin said, pawing through the castoffs. "I run barefoot."

"The cross-country trail has rocks and stubble, some of it's in the woods."

"Sounds good to me," Kevin shrugged, fishing a faded pair of Westover shorts and a torn T-shirt from the box. "I've been running on gravel."

"Without shoes?" Levy said doubtfully. "Show me your soles."

Pulling off his right boot and sock, Kevin canted his ankle to show the bottom of his foot. Leathery brown, calloused, and crisscrossed with scars.

"Good lord, you weren't kidding," Levy whistled. "Okay, bucko, let's see what you can do."

The team was already in the parking lot behind the gym, guys stretching, doing judo squats, or jogging in place. Kevin joined them, barefoot, in castoff shorts and a torn T-shirt.

"Listen up, people!" Levy shouted. "We're picking up the pace

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today. Five miles, and everybody finishes in twenty-two or less. Also, we have a new runner trying out for the team. He'll be running for time, so give him some room."

"Yo, Coach! The boy's got no shoes," a hulk with a kamikaze headband yelled.

"If he runs the course in twenty I'll give him yours, Beef. Everybody loosen up, we go in three minutes!"

Beef sauntered casually over beside Kevin, glanced around, then poked him stiffly in the ribs.

"Remember what Russ said, chump. You stick with the group, understand?"

"Something on your mind, Matuso?" Coach Levy asked.

"Nah, just welcoming what's-his-name here to the team."

"I'm touched by your concern," Levy said acidly. "Save your air for the course. Your times suck. Get over here, Kevin."

She quickly outlined the course for him, pointing out the markers. A thousand-yard straight-ahead, then through the woods, finishing in a wide circle back to the starting line.

"And watch yourself out there, McKay. Some of these guys are . . . playful." Her tone was neutral but her eyes underscored the warning.

Wandering to the rear of the crowd, Kevin relaxed, willing himself to utter calm. A state of mindless vacancy. Waiting. Something he was very good at.

The whistle blew and the pack moved out at a dogtrot, flowing over the broken ground, barely faster than a jog. A gorgeous afternoon, autumn sunlight glowing on the golf greens that rolled away to the east. Air sweet as a sonnet.

Kevin stayed well back, loafing along at the rear for the first hundred yards, but the pace was too slow. He felt gawky, disjointed. Couldn't settle into a running rhythm.

Picking it up a notch, he began threading through the group toward the front. Someone grabbed his wrist, nearly yanking him off his feet.

Beef Matuso, red-faced and furious. "Stay at the back, numbnuts!"

Jerking his arm free, Kevin cut sharply across the pack to lose Matuso. Ahead he could see the course markers curving into the woods.

Screw this! In three steps he was sprinting, overtaking the leaders. Feeling footsteps coming behind him, he lengthened his stride. The frontrunner, a tall black guy, grabbed at his shirt as he passed, tearing it. Knocking his arm away, Kevin picked up his pace another notch. He couldn't maintain this speed for long, but wouldn't have to.

Behind him, the ballplayers were already glowing red, burning out. They were big and athletic, but not prison-yard hard. No

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wind. More like joggers than serious distance runners.

Kev was beginning to feel the pace himself so he backed off a tad, settling into a steady groove, the Lope That Goes On Forever.

He risked a quick glance back. He was leading the mob by at least fifty meters now. He noticed a few runners breaking off to one side, Beef and two others. Probably giving up. From the crimson flush on Beef's suet face, stick a fork in him, he was done.

The ground was rising now as the path ahead vanished into the forest shadows. Trees. My God, real trees . . . Looking up, Kevin stumbled over a root. Forget the damn trees! Focus! Forcing himself to concentrate on his footing, Kev pictured cellblock walls to his right, a chain-link fence topped with bayonet wire to his left—

Somebody slammed into him from behind! The blow knocked him sprawling into the brush, briars clawing at his face as he rolled. Scrambling to his feet, he whirled to face them.

Beef, Russ, and a gangly kid with acne. They were blocking the path, streaming sweat, chests heaving. That's why they'd left the herd. They'd cut across the course to ambush him.

"I told you to stay with the damn team!" Russ panted. "You run with the pack, understand!"

Hell no, he didn't understand. He only knew that these three clowns were blocking his path with more guys coming. Don't get trapped here! Grabbing up a broken branch, Kevin charged at them, yelling, swinging the stick like a battle ax.

Russ and the gawky kid both dove aside, landing facedown in the dirt. Beef tried to stand his ground, but ducked away as Kevin swung the branch at his head. Then Kev was past them, racing down the trail flat out, running for his life.

The branch was throwing him off balance but he kept it anyway. Insurance. Out in the open, he glanced behind him. The three were still in the woods, red-faced, arguing. Run with the pack? What the hell was that about?

Apparently it was serious enough for Beef to stomp him— No. They hadn't hurt him, only knocked him down. There were weapons all around, rocks, tree branches, but they hadn't used them. Hell, they hadn't even seen them.

They were college boys, not gangbangers. They weren't looking to bust him up, just wanted him to play along with their stupid game.

But if Beef hadn't ducked aside, Kevin would have split his head open like a rotten tomato. And landed right back in Jackson. Doing twenty to life this time. Sweet Jesus.

Tossing the branch away, Kevin slowed his pace back to a lope. The others were straggling out of the woods now, nearly seventy yards behind him. Coach Levy clicked her stopwatch as Kevin crossed the finish line.

"Twenty-two minutes, eighteen seconds. Not record time, but

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promising. What happened to your face?"

Kevin felt his cheek, his fingertips came away bloody. "Tripped in the woods. Fell down."

"Hey, hotshot," Beef said, lumbering over the line, "Russ told you to stick with the team. You missed half the course."

"What are you talking about?" Levy demanded.

"Beef's right, Coach," Russ said, trotting up, panting, head down. "The new guy got lost in the woods, took a short cut. That's why he beat everybody."

"I saw people cutting across the course," Levy said. "McKay wasn't one of them. What about it, Kevin?"

"They might be right," Kevin said warily. "I could've gotten turned around back there."

"Next time stick closer," Russ panted. "You won't get lost."

"I'll remember," Kevin said. "I gotta go."

"Wait a minute!" Coach Levy called after him. Kevin didn't look back.

"Save your breath, Coach," Beef smirked at Russ. "That boy doesn't hear so good."

In the locker room, Kev quickly changed into his street clothes and headed for the door. He didn't make it. Beef hustled in with Russ right behind, followed by two more Kevin recognized from the run, the gaunt kid with acne and the tall black frontrunner who'd tried to pull him down. Beef leaned his back against the door, blocking it. Big shoulders on him, biceps the size of Kevin's thighs.

"We have to talk," Russ said. "Can you understand me all right?"

Kevin nodded, glancing around. Noticed a metal softball bat in the corner.

"I can save you a speech," Kev said, edging casually toward the bat, "I just want out of here. No need for trouble."

"No trouble?" Beef echoed, smacking a fist into his palm. "You run at us with a damn club and we just forget it?"

"I'm the only one who got banged up. It's over. Okay, Ruh?"

"His name's Russ, not Ruh or whatever the hell you're babblin'," Beef snapped. "Ruh! You sound like a goddamn dog. Ruh!"

"Ruh! Ruh!" the gaunt kid with the acne echoed, cackling. Russ grinned too, but his black buddy didn't. Stretch Thomas noticed Kevin sidling toward the bat. If Beef reached for Kevin, his brains would be all over the floor.

"Let him go, guys," Stretch said. "No harm, no foul." His eyes met Kevin's for a moment. Recognition. Street smart, both of them.

"Even picks up sticks like a dog," Beef sneered. "Is that what you are, some kinda hound, boy?"

"Maybe I am," Kevin nodded, measuring his path to the door, figuring he could clock Beef and be gone before the others could react. "All I want is out of here."

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"Then, git!" Beef said, stepping away from the door. "Git, dog boy! Ruh! Ruh!" He faked a lunge at Kevin, then trotted past him to the showers, guffawing.

Backing warily out the door, Kevin headed down the hallway, the sounds of barking and laughter echoing after him.

"Hold on, McKay!" Stepping out of her office, Coach Levy blocked his path. "You're quitting, aren't you." It wasn't a question.

"It's not going to work out, Coach. Sorry I wasted your time."

"What happened out there?"

"I tripped. I'm not used to running with other people."

"Your time was pretty good even if you did take a shortcut. Or whatever. With some training, you could probably beat most of the deadwood I've got now."

"I don't care about winning, Coach, I just like to run. Hoped if I was good enough, I could practice on my own time."

"Why?"

"I need a job. My grant only pays tuition."

"Everybody wants special treatment, ballplayers, other coaches, even you. At least being broke's a good excuse. What kind of a job do you need?"

"I'm a pretty handy carpenter, but I'll do anything."

"I'll see what I can do. But nothing's for nothing, McKay. If I find you a job, you're going to tell me what happened out there today. Deal?"

He felt the full force of her gaze. A good-looking woman who didn't bother using her sex appeal. Tough enough without it.

"Deal," he said.

Afternoon classes were letting out as Kevin walked back to his room at HI House, the hearing-impaired dorm. Kids were crowding the sidewalks, cliquing up, pairing off. A mix of preppies, goths, and gangstas, middle-class white kids dressing ghetto black. Goofing and joking around with each other as the leaves wafted down from the ancient maples shading the streets. An amber autumn afternoon. Almost exactly as he'd pictured it when he read *The Sonnets of September.* So exquisite it felt surreal. Hell, maybe it was surreal.

Reality was the crew of college punks in the locker room, Beef and Russ chasing him down, looking to kick his ass. He wondered about that, but didn't waste much time on it. He was used to mindless violence. Trying to understand it was a shortcut to the psycho ward. All that mattered was survival.

As he came in the front door, the cheerful, frizzy-haired dorm chief, Hannah Dunlop, waved him over. She was sitting in the common room with a cluster of hearing-impaired students. She introduced Kevin around the group, a very weird feeling. In prison, he'd always been the odd man out. Dummy, Deaf-O, whatever.

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Not so different here. He felt no real kinship to these kids. Young, and incredibly naive, their clever hands flashing conversation back and forth like heat lightning, too fast for him to follow. It was confusing, after years of reading the narrowed lips of wary men who spoke in sidelong whispers. If at all.

Mumbling an excuse about having homework, Kev bailed out and trotted upstairs to his room.

To his cell. Locking himself in, he stood with his back to the door a moment, catching his breath. He was safe now. Locked in.

Institutionalized—the term for guys who'd metabolized the system so thoroughly that steel bars were embedded in their bones. Even when they were freed their souls stayed caged.

And they never stayed free for long.

Kevin shook his head, trying to clear it. He wasn't like that. He had promise. Dr. Devlin said so.

Dr. Claire Devlin. It was quite a jolt being so close to her after all this time. In the same room, with only a desk between them. She wasn't at all what he'd expected.

Definitely not the lush young girl on the book jacket. Not anymore.

Frowning over that stack of papers in her dim office, she seemed . . . careworn.

Older, certainly, by fifteen years. But it wasn't the time, so much. More like her spirit had faded. She was harder now, a realist who no longer trusted the future.

Flopping on his bed, he laced his fingers behind his neck, mulling it over. A conundrum. A college girl writes a collection of poems about her hopes for the new autumn. A dozen years later, a convict reads those sonnets, and wakes up. Her poetry saved him by giving him hope.

But during those same dozen years, the girl who wrote the poems changed into a brusque, businesslike professor. With no burning hopes of her own.

How could that be? That the poems which seemed so magical to him hadn't worked for the woman who wrote them?

Maybe he'd ask her. If he could manage to stay out of jail long enough.

Crossing to the window, Kev raised it wide open, then dragged his bed over beside it.

After a quick shower, he wrote an ironic piece for the paper, "Welcome to Westover," about crashing into the underbrush on his disastrous first day of school. Then he stretched out on the bed to read a few verses of the *Sonnets* before sleep.

But for once, the verses failed him. Instead of conjuring up visions of an idyllic autumn dusk, he kept seeing the face of Claire Devlin in her dimly lit office, frowning over her papers.

And in the night, he dreamed of her. Nothing new about that, he often dreamed of the girl on the book jacket. Sensual, lingering

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dreams. Undressing her slowly. Making languorous love to her.

But tonight, his fantasies were a jagged shambles. As he disrobed the girl on the book jacket, she morphed into the woman in the office, then back again, faster and faster, until he snapped awake!

Sweating. Shaking. And aroused almost to orgasm.

Speech lab. Kevin was closeted in a soundproof booth with a digital recorder and a dorky grad student who looked like Ichabod Crane. Forty minutes of word endings—*ed*, *ing*, and the plural *ess*. Constant repetitions, trying to match his pronunciation to Ichabod's, then listening to the playback of his voice on the recorder.

It should have been deadly dull, but with his new hearing aids, Kevin could actually discern the difference between "sister" and "mister," "batter" and "matter." Even "ruh" and "Russ."

He jumped when the class bell sounded, amazed that the hour had flown by so quickly.

In the corridor crush, Dina Cohen overtook him, her red hair piled high, knotted like a dust mop. Which somehow only made her more attractive.

"Hey, hotshot," she said. "I read some of your stuff last night. In *The New Yorker* and *Atlantic*. Even found the story in *Ellery Queen*."

"Yeah? Got a job for me today? Emptying wastebaskets, maybe?"

"Don't be a hardhead, McKay. The *Atlantic* piece about the old man dying in prison was really tough. Where'd you come up with that?"

"I grew up in foster care, half my friends are in the joint. A guy told me once we all live in cages, locked in by our fears. We think we're free, but we're not."

She stared at him.

"What?"

"Nothing, that's pretty heavy, is all. What happened to your face?"

"Ruh! Ruh, ruh!" One of the punks from the cross-country team passed them headed the other way. The gaunt one with the acne pits. Brad? Flipping Kevin the bird, he woofed again, then sauntered off, laughing.

"What was that about?" Dina asked.

"Nothing."

"It looked like something to me. Why was that guy barking at you?"

"Maybe he was barking at you, Cohen. Did you find my essay? I left it on your desk."

"It's excellent. It'll be in the *Wildcat* this afternoon."

"Any suggestions?"

She hesitated, the first trace of uncertainty he'd seen in her. "Look, I'm only a grad student, you're the one who's been published."

"You're the TA in charge and I came here to learn. Fire away."

"All right, in a few places, your language seemed stilted. As though you were reciting something you've read rather than talking."

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"Right. Anything else?"

"You're not angry?"

"No, Dr. Devlin told me once I was echoing speech patterns from books."

"You've studied with Claire before? I thought you were a new student?"

Kevin was groping for an answer when Coach Levy spotted him from across the hall.

"McKay? Can I see you?" She waved him over. They stepped into an open doorway, out of the traffic. "We have a deal. I help you out, you tell me what really happened yesterday."

"You found me a job?"

"Maybe something better. What happened out there?"

"You first."

She eyed him, then shrugged. "We'll split the difference and talk about the team first. You're a new student, how much do you know about Westover?"

"It has an ace English department and facilities for the hearing impaired. That's all I care about."

"Our athletics programs are pretty good, too. My girls' gymnastics team won the state championship last year, but basketball's the real game here. The Wildcats have made the NCAA playoffs three out of the last five years."

"I don't follow sports much."

"The point is, basketball sells bales of tickets and brings in big alumni checks. Cross country doesn't earn a dime, which is why it's always been run by an assistant basketball coach as a conditioning camp for ballplayers. Until last spring, when they gave me the job."

"What's all that got to do with me?"

"Just this," she said, glancing around to be sure they weren't overheard. "The team is a joke. The ballplayers are loafing, hoping the administration will fire me so things can go back to the way they were."

"I still don't—"

"Four of them have full scholarships, McKay. But not as basketball players. As runners. Beef Matuso, Brad Bailey, Russ Nesbit, and Stretch Thomas. And you were outrunning all of them yesterday. Until you . . . tripped."

"So?"

"So in ten days we'll have our first track meet with Ballard College, then five more track meets through November. If you can place in those meets, and consistently beat one of the ballplayers, I'll transfer his scholarship to you next semester."

Kevin's turn to stare. "An athletic scholarship? How much is that worth?"

"The full ride, tuition, books, board, the works. I'm the first woman to coach a men's sport at Westover. I have no intention of

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being pushed out by some pampered jocks."

"But I have to beat those guys to win the scholarship, right? That might be tough."

"Ever hear about the two hikers who got jumped by a bear? One stops to lace up his running shoes. 'What are you doing?' his buddy yells. 'You can't outrun a bear!'"

"I don't have to," Kevin finished. "I only have to outrun you."

"Exactly. They're athletes, they can run if they want to. But you're in better shape and you don't have to beat all of them. Just one."

"It won't be so funny if I'm the guy the bear catches."

"Tell me what happened out there, Kevin. Let me help."

"No, I'll handle it. I really appreciate the offer, Coach. I'll . . . think about it."

"Did they rough you up, McKay? Is that all it takes to scare you off?"

"It's not that simple. If I beat some of those guys there'll be trouble. I've had trouble. I don't want anymore."

"It's your call." Coach Levy shrugged, disappointed. "The offer stands until the meet with Ballard. Think it over." She stalked off without a backward glance.

Kev was late to Dr. Devlin's Creative Writing class. Edging in, he took a seat at the back, hoping she wouldn't notice. It didn't work.

"Nice you could join us, Mr. McKay," Dr. Devlin said, ticking his name off her seating chart. "One school of thought says good writing can't be taught, that it's an innate talent. Personally, I agree with that theory, but school policy requires your presence in class. On time."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry." Kevin heard some snickers, but they didn't matter. Dr. Devlin resumed her lecture. That didn't matter either.

From the moment she began to speak, the rest of the room faded away into a vague haze. He focused totally on her face, her movements, the tone of her voice. Utterly entranced. She reminded him of a raven, dark hair and eyes, narrow face. She was dressed in black again, a dark blouse beneath a black cardigan. Was she in mourning? For what, he wondered? The dead dreams she'd written about in the *Sonnets?* The hour flew by in a blur that seemed like seconds.

At the bell she dismissed the class.

"Mr. McKay, can I see you a moment?"

Kevin waited for the room to empty before approaching her desk.

"You asked a favor of me yesterday. I'd like one in return. Would you mind not staring at me so . . . fixedly? It's unnerving."

"I wasn't staring exactly, I was reading your lips."

"Why? I thought you had cochlear surgery."

"I've been lipreading most of my life, Doc. It still helps me to understand. Was there anything else?"

She eyed him a moment, chewing the corner of her lip. A habit

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which was giving her worry lines. "Dina showed me your essay. It's excellent. She said your work in *The New Yorker* and the story in *Ellery Queen* were even better. If you're still interested in poetry, there's a slam at Shannon's Irish Pub next Thursday."

"A slam?"

"Real poetry slams are competitive readings, but this will be our first of the semester. It'll be more of a get-acquainted session."

"Will you be there?"

"I—usually attend, yes. It's a fun group, mostly students interested in writing and poetry. A good chance for you to meet people your *own* age."

"They're not my age, Doc. In some ways I'm older than you are. And a thousand years older than these kids. If I see you there, will we have a chance to talk?"

"About what?"

"Poetry," he said innocently. "What else?"

In the corridor, Kevin was scanning his schedule for his next class when Dina Cohen fell in step beside him. "So? What did Coach Levy want?"

He gave her a look.

"I know it's none of my business." She grinned. "But being nosy will win me a Pulitzer someday. What's the story?"

"You were right the first time, it's none of your business."

"Fine. Hey, if you're not busy next Thursday, there's a poetry thing at Shannon's Pub—"

"Ruh! Ruh!" Brad barked in his ear.

Reflex! Jamming a forearm into the lanky jock's throat, Kevin slammed him up against the wall. Pinned him there, stunned and strangling. Their faces an inch apart.

"If you ever touch me again you'll need crutches for the rest of your freakin' life," Kevin hissed, his eyes ablaze. "And if you sic your crew on me, I'll find you afterward, understand? I'll bust you *up*!"

Banging Brad's head against the wall for emphasis, Kevin thrust him away. The jock stumbled off down the hall, dazed and coughing, gasping for breath.

Kevin glanced quickly around to see if anyone had noticed—Dina Cohen was staring at him, wide-eyed, her face ashen. He started to explain, then realized he couldn't. He wheeled and walked off.

"What in the hell was all that?" Jake Schmidt asked, crossing the hall from the journalism-room doorway. "I thought he was going to kill that guy. Nice friend you've got."

"He's not a friend," Dina said, still shaken by the savagery in Kevin's eyes. "I'm not sure what he is."

"I can tell you what he's not," Jake said. "He's not alive. After I dug up those magazine pieces, I Googled the hell out of his name. Know what I found? Zip. Absolute zero. So I cross-checked a few

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other data banks. Same thing. On the information superhighway, your buddy Kevin isn't even a speed bump."

"Meaning what?"

"You're the reporter, you tell me. The guy's attending Westover on a poverty grant for the hearing impaired, but he didn't list a home address, has no charge accounts, no credit rating, not even a driver's license. I managed to hack his social-security number out of his college app. Same thing. No job history, he's never paid a nickel in withholding taxes. But according to his application, he's twenty-three. How's he been eating? Out of dumpsters?"

"Why did you hack his social security?"

"Dina, at this point I'm ready to try the obituaries. The only place McKay exists is in a couple of magazines and the Westover data bank. Your pal's a ghost."

"Why do you keep calling him my pal?"

"Because I saw your face that first day, Dina. You used to look at me that way."

"Don't go there again, Jake. We were a disaster."

"And this guy's what? Mr. Right?"

"No, he's Mr. Already-been-published. Which puts him two jumps ahead of me, and ten ahead of you."

"So? Should I keep digging?"

"Damn straight," she said. "Whatever you find, I want to know."

Dusk was settling softly across the Westover campus as Kevin trudged back to his dorm from the library. The autumn sun was already south of the skyline, throwing the row houses and tree-shaded street into a study in shadows. Free air, sweet enough to sip.

He kept looking around as he walked, not for a tail or for danger, just marveling at the spaciousness of the campus. No fences, no bars. Broad, green, immaculate lawns, homes without safety gates or gun towers. A kid pedaled by on a bike, his hair spiked in a multicolored mohawk. Exotic as a tropical bird.

Porch lights were glowing a welcome in the twilight. Trotting up the steps at HI House, he paused to knock, then realized he didn't have to. Smiling, he went in. And froze.

A slender stud in an Armani sport coat and jeans, stylish as a supermodel with fine, almost feminine features, stepped out of the common room, his arms open in greeting.

"Yo, cuz, how you been?" Jojo Nello asked, embracing Kevin like long-lost kin. "You look good. Hannah must be takin' extra good care of you."

"What are you doing here?" Kevin hissed.

"Passing through. Thought I'd pop in, see how you're getting on. If I'd known you had such a foxy dorm chief I'd have come sooner."

"Your cousin's been catching us up on your family history," Hannah said, practically glowing. "We don't usually allow overnight

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guests the first semester but since there's an extra bed in your room we'll make an exception."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," Jojo said, bowing like Errol Flynn.

"Come on, *cuz*," Kevin said, clamping onto Jojo's bicep, hauling him up the stairs. "I could use a little catching up myself."

Thrusting Jojo into his room, Kevin closed the door and locked it.

Jojo did a slow pirouette, taking it in. His dark hair had grown out, halfway down to his shoulders. His goatee was trimmed so close it looked like he'd applied it with a pencil.

"Nice crib," Jo said, facing Kevin. "A lot cleaner than D-block."

"Same question, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Visiting an old cellmate."

"Are you on the run?"

"No. Well, not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

Jojo shrugged. "It means that guy who said you can't go home again was right. When I got paroled last spring I went home to Motown, called in a few markers. I was back in business the first week."

"Dealing dope?"

"Marketing medication," Jojo corrected. "Strictly upscale, no street trade. Mostly high-grade reefer and Ecstasy. I'm in the Ponchartrain Hotel making a delivery when some Mex stops me in the hall. He flashes a gun, says the Ponch is Latin Kings turf, says fork over my roll or he'll cap me right there."

"And?"

"Hey, I'm a lover, not a fighter. I gave him my money. And the clown just walked away. Turned his back on me like I didn't matter. Like he could rip me off and that was the end of it."

"What happened?"

"Darwinism, man. The dipshit was too stupid to live. I grabbed a fire extinguisher, busted his head, then stomped him bad. Made damn sure he never wants to see my fine ass again. Then I made some calls to work out a deal with the Kings, take over the dude's territory, pay them a percentage. Only nobody was home. It was like everybody I knew split for the moon. That night, the Kings shot up my folks' house. I haven't lived there since my first stretch in juvy, eight years ago. They had to know that. They hit it anyway. My little sister might lose her arm."

"Sorry to hear it. So?"

"So I'm screwed, Kev. There's no reasoning with these guys. They're like pit bulls on speed. I asked one of the Gusanos from D-block to set up a meet. He says it's too late. I'm already dead, just ain't laid down yet. So I hatted up."

"And came *here?*"

"Hell no, man, I covered my trail first. Went down to Naptown, then out to L.A. Made some contacts, put my name around, then

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faded out. And here I am."

"My long-lost cousin?"

"It beats being your old cellmate from the House of Many Doors."

"What do you want, Jojo? I don't have any money."

"I don't need any. I just need to crash here long enough to turn over part of my stash, get a bankroll together. You owe me, Kev. I did a month in solitary for cuttin' that rape-o who jumped you in the showers."

"I haven't forgotten," Kevin said.

"Good. So? Which bunk's mine?"

Kevin snapped awake. Stayed utterly still in the darkness. Listening. The night breeze was ruffling the lace curtains, but that hadn't wakened him. He'd been sleeping with his palm flat on the floor, an old habit. Someone had moved. He'd felt it. Sitting up slowly, he scanned the room. Jojo's bed was empty.

The bathroom was empty too. Which meant Jojo was on the prowl. And the bedside clock read two-twenty.

Damn. A ripoff? Maybe. Jojo said he didn't need money but truth was a flexible thing with him. His whole hard-luck story could be a crock. And if he pulled a rip and disappeared, Kevin could be left answering a lot of ugly questions from a lot of unhappy people.

Pulling on his jeans, Kev inserted his hearing aids, then slipped silently out of the room, barefoot. The hallway was deserted, no light showing under any of the doors. He crept downstairs, hugging the wall. No one in the common room either. Damn it! Where was he?

The kitchen was empty but he felt a vibration on the counter. Movement. Something violent was going on somewhere. Running his palm along the walls, he tracked the disturbance to Hannah Dunlop's room. Here. He could actually hear it now, as well as feel it.

Humping. Energetic, erotic, instantly recognizable. Kev knew that particular vibration all too well from Jackson. Heard Hannah giggling, Jojo murmuring sweet nothings. Then a long groan that seemed to stretch on and on . . .

Backing away, Kevin padded silently upstairs to his room. Then lay down in the dark. Waiting.

Jojo slipped in half an hour later. Shirtless, barefoot, hadn't even zipped up his jeans. Noticed Kevin watching him.

"You awake?" Moonlight rippled across Jo's sculpted frame as he crossed to Kevin's bed and knelt beside it.

"Have a good time?" Kevin whispered.

"So-so. Just takin' out a little wango-tango insurance policy in case you get tired of my company. Had to work for it, too. Your chubby little dorm chief about wore me out."

"Just remember our deal. You can stay a couple of days. Then you're gone."

"Right," Jojo agreed. "Absolutely."

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A long night, and the morning was no better. A rustbucket Camaro was parked at the curb outside HI House, the three white jocks from the track team leaning against it, waiting for him as he came down the steps. Beef Matuso, blond Russ, and Brad, the kid he'd roughed up in the hall.

"Coach Levy told us about the offer she made you," Russ said bluntly. "Said she's putting our scholarships up for grabs."

"Bitch thinks she can make us run like dogs," Matuso growled. "But she's the one who's gonna run."

"You have to understand our situation," Russ went on. "None of us can qualify for a basketball scholarship. We're bench players, strictly second string. All we do is keep games close while the hotshots rest up."

"Or not so close," Brad put in, earning glares from the others.

"The point is," Russ continued, "basketball's the game that fills the bleachers. Nobody gives a rip about cross country. If you beat one of our guys and take his scholarship, he'll be gone next semester, in the middle of the season. It'll be bad for the team, bad for the school."

"And real bad for you," Matuso added. "Could make you damned unpopular."

"Cut to it," Kevin said. "What do you guys want?"

"A way we can all come out winners," Russ said smoothly. "Forget about beating one of us, not that you could anyway. And in compensation, we'll front you some cash. Say . . . five hundred for missing the Ballard meet?"

"Five hundred's a lot," Kevin conceded. "But a scholarship's worth more."

"Only if you win," Matuso said coldly. "And only if you're around to collect it. Personally, I don't like your odds either way."

"Neither do I," Kevin said. "Gotta go, guys, I've got a class."

"Wait a minute," Russ said, "what about our offer?"

"I'll give it some thought," Kevin said, backing warily away.

"I told you trying to buy him off was a mistake," Beef groused, glaring after Kevin. "Let me stomp him, Russ."

"Bad idea," Russ said. "Coach Levy already knows we crowded him. We can't have any rough stuff traced back to us."

"We got too much on the line to screw with him," Matuso argued. "I could waste him, dump him on the north side. Make it look like he got mugged."

"Unless somebody spots your dream machine," Russ said, patting the Camaro's rusty roof. "I'll try to hire it out first. If I can't, he's all yours. I'm late for poly sci, guys. See you at practice." Shouldering his book bag, Russ trotted off toward the main quad.

"Whoa," Brad said, grabbing Beef's arm. "You aren't serious about whacking the dog boy, are you?"

Matuso glanced both ways down the sun-dappled street to make

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sure they were alone. "You'd better get somethin' straight, Bailey. This deal we got goin' isn't some frat-boy prank. We can make a lot of money if we pull it off, but if it goes wrong, we can get seriously busted up. Crippled, or even dead. So if you think I'm lettin' some schmuck like the dog boy just waltz in and screw it up, think again. Anybody who messes with us is dead meat."

"You better cut back on the steroids, Beef, you're scarin' me." Brad grinned uneasily, trying to loosen Matuso up. But the bull-necked jock only glowered at him. Climbing into his Camaro, Beef roared off, burning rubber all the way to the corner.

Staring after him, Brad realized Matuso was dead freaking serious about wasting McKay. And that needling the big guy about his 'roid intake was a really bad idea.

"The funny part is, it's much ado about nothing," Kevin told Jojo later that afternoon. "I couldn't collect a scholarship if I won every freakin' race. The school would run a background check, find out I'm an ex-con, end of story."

"Then why not take the payoff money?" Jojo asked. They were in Kevin's room at HI House, Kevin staring out the window, Jojo lounging on his bed, leafing through the latest issue of *GQ*.

"It's tempting," Kevin admitted. "I could use the five hundred. But it's too much for too little. You know what rule number one in the joint is: Nothing's free. Not a cigarette, not even a smile."

"You're complaining because the money's too easy?" Jojo asked. "Did I miss something?"

"No, but I did. The last time I took easy money, it cost me six years of my life."

"What happened?"

"A neighborhood gambler slipped me twenty bucks to be a lookout for a craps game in an alley. All I had to do was watch the street, sing out if the law showed."

"Easy money," Jojo agreed.

"Seemed like it. Until the game got raided from the far end of the alley. I was deaf back then, had no idea anything was wrong until a cop grabbed me from behind. I slammed him into a wall, broke his arm. Got six to ten for resisting arrest and assault on an officer."

"Bad luck."

"The point is, I don't like being played without knowing the name of the game."

"Maybe I can help," Jojo said casually. "I meet a lot of people in my business. I can ask around."

"I thought you were leaving."

"Oh, I am. But if those jocks are giving you a tough time, the least I can do is check into it."

But Kevin heard no more about Jojo's efforts as an amateur detec-

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tive. Over the weekend he saw less and less of his temporary roommate. Jojo was becoming more nocturnal, spending his evenings roaming the campus selling weed and party pills while Kevin stayed holed up in his room at HI House, crashing the books.

By Thursday, Kev was ready for a break, looking forward to the poetry slam, whatever it was. He didn't give a damn about the poetry, but Claire Devlin would be there.

Shannon's Irish Pub was a sports saloon just off the Westover College campus. A busy watering hole with pool tables and pinball machines. But one night a month, the gaming tables were covered as Shannon's hosted the Third Thursday Slam, an open-microphone night where Westover's wannabe poets could test-fly their literary efforts in front of a live audience.

The audience was wall-to-wall when Kevin shouldered into the club. A denim-clad undergrad with a handlebar moustache was on the spot-lit stage, earnestly reading an anti-war *Song of Roland* set in Iraq. Most of the crowd was college age, with a sprinkling of older poets and faculty scattered around the room.

He was buying a beer at the bar when someone touched his arm.

"Glad you could make it," Dina Cohen said, "Come on, I saved you a seat." He followed her through the crush to a corner booth. He had to admit, Dina looked sharp, her red hair and fair skin a vivid contrast with her aqua peasant blouse. Very attractive, Kev thought. Until he realized that Claire Devlin was sitting a few tables over with a pleasantly pudgy older woman. Claire had dressed down, if anything, wearing a plain black turtleneck and faded jeans, her dark hair coarsely finger-combed. And yet he had to force himself not to stare.

"She can't do you any good, you know," Dina said, annoyed, following his eyes.

"What are you talking about?" Kevin asked.

"Dr. Devlin. She hates suck-ups, so making nice with her won't help your grades. Besides, you've already climbed higher than she ever has. You've been published nationally. All she ever managed was a book of verse as an undergrad, and a couple of novels that barely broke even. Those who can't do, teach."

"Teaching *is* doing, Cohen. For those of us who don't already know it all."

"I'm only saying that with your talent, you don't need a teacher, maybe you just need a friend. Did you bring a poem?"

"No, why?"

"Then you'd better think of one," Dina said, jumping up and trotting to the podium as the earnest reader finished his offering to a smattering of applause.

"Thanks, Mark, that was marvelous," Dina said, using the microphone to address the entire room. "And now, folks, it's time

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for our first newbie of the night. Kevin McKay has just joined the *Wildcat* staff, and in keeping with campus tradition, he will now step to the mike to recite . . . what will you be reading, Kevin?"

Stunned, he just stared at her.

"Come on, Kev, don't be shy. Do 'Mary Had a Little Lamb,' if you like, but you have to do something. It's a rule."

Everyone was looking at him expectantly now. Including Claire and her friend. Dina was holding out the microphone, the challenge in her eyes.

He rose abruptly, stalked to the stage, and took the mike as Dina trotted back to her table.

"I'm no public speaker," he said, gesturing at his hearing aids, "but I like poetry and I think it's important. This poem means a lot to me. Canto the second, from *The Sonnets of September* by Claire Anne Devlin.

" 'Autumn is an amber season . . .' " he began, reciting the complex verse verbatim, entirely from memory. Occasionally fracturing a word, he rendered the work with such intensity that the half-buzzed collegiate crowd fell utterly silent. Listening.

Across the dimly lit room, Claire found herself embarrassed and entranced by turns as Kevin poured out her girlish fantasies of fifteen years before. She recalled a snatch of a song, about a young man finding letters and reading them aloud. That's what it felt like, as though Kevin had found her diary—

Stella was staring at her.

"What?"

"You're misting up, love," Stella said, passing her a hanky.

"Must be the smoke," Claire said, dabbing her eyes as Kevin finished the poem to enthusiastic applause, and returned to Dina's table.

"The room's smokeless, Claire. And you should see your face."

"Okay, it was the poem. I haven't heard it for a very long time."

"I've never heard it at all and I've known you ten years. You're a great teacher, Claire, smart, tough, and efficient, and one of my dearest friends. But I would never have recognized that verse as something you'd written. And your young man read it with real passion."

"He's not my young man."

"Of course he is. Or he wants to be. It's in his eyes every time he looks over here."

"Don't be gauche, Stel. He's a student, forgodsake."

"He's not a juvenile, Claire. He's quite attractive, if you like the sturdy, outdoors type, and who doesn't? Looks hard as an iron bar, and seems very bright."

"He's a handsome boy," Claire conceded. "He's also a dozen years younger than I am."

"And Dean Bruckner's trophy wife is twenty years younger than he is. Loosen up, Claire. Would a little flirtation be so terrible?

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François Villon said the only sins he regretted were the ones he didn't commit."

"Villon was hanged, Stel. And I've enjoyed all the amateur psychoanalysis I can stand for one evening," Claire said, gathering up her books. "See you tomorrow."

"Dr. Devlin? Wait up," Kevin called, hurrying to overtake her on the street.

"What is it, McKay?"

"I'll walk you home, if you don't mind. There might be unsavory characters around."

"You would know," Claire said briskly, resuming her stride. "Fine, walk with me. And let's clear the air."

"About?" Kevin asked, falling into step beside her.

"Your recitation was very . . . moving. But I'm not the girl who wrote that verse. I haven't been for quite some time. The *Sonnets* are a snapshot of who I was at nineteen, nothing more."

"Okay," he nodded, taking that in. "So whatever happened to that girl?"

"She grew up, Kevin. And her life didn't turn out as expected."

"No kidding? What a coincidence. Neither did mine." He said it so seriously that she smiled in spite of herself.

"Touché."

"And your Great Love? What about him?" She glanced at him sharply, scanning his eyes for more sarcasm. "Those are your words, Doc, not mine."

"I married him," Claire said simply. "The same year the *Sonnets* were published. We were a perfect match, everything in common; careers, friends, politics. Dinks. Double income, no kids. We bought a house, a car, and a vacation cottage and we lasted a year. We're still friends. It's what we should have been all along."

"Thank God for that."

"For what?" she echoed.

"That things didn't work out. We might not be having this conversation, otherwise."

"We aren't having a conversation, Mr. McKay. We're clearing the air." She stopped, facing him. "Your attention is very flattering. But you're an intelligent young man, with the accent on *young*. I'm a dozen years older and our backgrounds couldn't be more different. We have an instructor/student relationship, but that's it. Anything beyond that is quite impossible. Am I clear?"

"Absolutely. And back in Jackson I would've said precisely the same thing. Impossible. But I read your book, and now I'm free. I've made it to Westover and I've found you. And we're walking on Conover, one of the avenues you mention in the *Sonnets*. And the wind is riffling your hair. And lady, nothing on this earth seems impossible to me anymore."

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"This conversation is making me uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry, that's not my intention. I'm the last person in the world you need to worry about. I'd still be locked up if not for you. Anytime you want me gone, just say so. You won't see me again."

"You mean you'd leave school? And I'd be responsible? That's not fair."

"Gee, is life supposed to be fair? I must've missed that class. So? Do you want me gone?"

"Not yet, Mr. McKay," she sighed, resuming her stride. "But don't push it, please. Look, I understand you were in a terrible situation, and I can see how you might become obsessed with a book of poetry—"

"And the woman who wrote it," he added.

"Or her outdated *picture*, to be more precise," she amended. "Seeing me for the first time must have been quite a shock."

"Actually it was a relief. I can read a copyright date, Claire, I knew how old you were before I came here. I'm just glad I found you in time."

"In time for what?" She stopped again, facing him, exasperated. "What do you want from me?"

He hesitated, reading the anger in her eyes. And the anguish. "Nothing," he said abruptly. "Not a thing. Least of all to upset you."

"Then we're done with this! Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I do." He nodded. "I hear pretty clearly these days, thanks to you. I won't bother you again, Doctor. This is your block, you'll be okay from here. Goodnight."

He walked away and so did she. At her gate, she glanced back, but he'd already vanished. And she was startled by the sharp pang of disappointment she felt. Shaking off her own foolishness, she stormed inside, slamming the door.

Stalking angrily across the campus, Kevin passed street names he recognized from the *Sonnets*. In the verses, they'd glowed, but they were dark now. A match for his mood.

As he approached HI House, he slowed his pace, hearing the rumble of a familiar exhaust. Fading back behind a towering maple, he watched Beef Matuso wheel his rustbucket Camaro to the curb to drop off a student in front of the dorm, then roar away into the darkness. Kevin didn't recognize the kid. A preppie in tan chinos and tassel loafers, an Eddie Bauer raglan sweater—with a start, Kevin realized it was Jojo.

"Yo, wait up," he called, overtaking Jojo on the steps.

"Hey yourself," Jo said, wheeling quickly to face him, then relaxing. His hair was neatly trimmed, matching his collegiate outfit. "What's up?"

"Looks like you are," Kevin said, grasping his arm, leading Jo into the shadows at the far end of the porch. "New threads?

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New haircut?"

"A whole new me," Jojo grinned. "I like this town, these college kids. Everybody's so . . . hopeful, you know? You can almost smell the possibilities in the air."

"All I smell is reefer in the air," Kevin said. "You smoking dope with Matuso now?"

"It's just business, bro. With all the stress in their lives, those jocks need a lot of medication. Mostly steroids for Matuso."

"I thought all you had was Ecstasy and weed."

"I made a local contact to pick up some 'roids. Business 101, pal, supply and demand."

"You're not in business, Jojo. You were only going to unload enough product to get traveling money, then move on. Or are you reconsidering your options?"

"Oh, I'm way past that point. My new Nunn Bush loafers are on the path to higher education, Kev. New town, new friends, new life."

"And screw your old friend, right? Our deal was, you'd crash a few days, then split."

"Our freakin' *deal?* You think loaning a buddy a spare cot gives us a lifetime contract? I changed my mind, that's all. I look around and like what I see. You're making a new start for yourself, why shouldn't I?"

"Because it's not a new start! It's the same old shit in a new haircut. You see a bunch of college punks with more money than brains and all of a sudden you're a drug dealer to the upper classes."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It is! These kids aren't street smart. The first time one of 'em gets popped, he'll toss you to the cops like fish food. You'll be back in Jackson before your bunk gets cold."

"It could happen," Jojo conceded. "So? What do you think I should do, college boy?"

"Move on, like you said you would."

"Where? Back to Motown? Maybe get the rest of my family killed? Cincy or Naptown? I got no connections there. Here, at least I've got a friend. Or haven't I?"

"Not for much longer, Jo. If you get busted, I'll fall too. My record will come out and they'll run me off."

"Not to worry, Kev. You'll be long gone before that."

"What are you talking about?"

"You've gotta clear out, man. Those jocks scraped up enough money to put out a contract on you. A thousand dollars to run you off or put you in traction and they don't care which."

"A contract? Bullshit! That's crazy!"

"Maybe so, but it's also the flat-ass truth. They asked me to hire somebody to stomp you, I guess they figure dope dealers know a lot of lowlifes. But don't worry, I told 'em I'd handle it personally."

"You took a contract on *me?*" Kevin flared, grabbing Jojo's shirt,

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spinning him around. "You son of a bitch!"

Jojo flicked his wrist and a blade flashed into his palm like lightning. Before Kevin could step back, he felt the prick of cold steel against his throat.

"Lighten up, my man," Jojo said softly, pressing the blade against Kev's carotid without breaking the skin. "Jesus, you aren't even carryin' a shank anymore, are you? I could carve my initials into your liver and you couldn't do anything about it but bleed. Now let go of my shirt, Kev, before I mess us both up."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Better me than some punk who'd pulp your knees with a baseball bat and walk away whistling. At least I'm telling you the score. You've gotta go, Kevin. They'll bust you up if you don't. And it's not like we can run to the cops about it."

"But why? Over a lousy scholarship?"

"Hell no, it's a lot heavier than that. These boys got themselves a real sweet deal goin'. When they're buzzed up, it's all they talk about. I'm already figuring a way to—" Jojo did a quick figure-eight slash past Kevin's cheek "—cut myself into their action."

"What kind of action?" Kevin demanded.

"It doesn't work that way, bro," Jo said, slipping the blade back up his sleeve. "If you want in, maybe we can talk a deal. Otherwise, you're out."

"No deals, Jojo. I don't want any part of this."

"Good, more for me. But you'll be sorry later."

"I'm sorry already."

"Not as sorry as you're gonna be. The team's dead serious, Kevin. If I don't run you off, Matuso'll come after you himself and he's one scary sucker. The guy gobbles steroids like popcorn and you know how bad 'roids can mess up your head. He's as paranoid as any psycho we knew in the slam. So you've gotta go, brother. The jocks fronted me a grand to make you disappear. It's yours. I owe you that much. Take the grand, and take off. Or they'll do ya, simple as that."

"A grand?" Kevin echoed drily. "My price keeps going up."

"It'll drop to zero if Matuso does the job."

"I see," Kevin nodded, taking a deep breath, and a last look around. "Hell, why not? I don't belong in this place anyway. It was never gonna work out."

"Going straight, you mean? Wouldn't know, never tried it myself."

"Okay," Kevin shrugged. "I'm out of here. When can I have the money?"

Professor Devlin flinched, startled, when she flicked on her office lights. Kevin McKay was sitting in the shadows, in the chair beside her desk.

"How did you get in here?"

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"I minored in burglary at my last school. Don't get bent out of shape, Doc, I'm gone. I only stopped to say goodbye."

"You're leaving school?" Claire asked, taking her seat at the desk, facing him . "Why? Because of what I said last night?"

"Partly, but I've run into a problem. If I stay, I might get into a jam that could put me back inside. And I'd rather die than go back, so I'm moving on."

"I'm . . . sorry to hear that."

"So am I. But since I probably won't see you again, I don't want to leave things the way they ended last night. You wanted the air clear, okay, here's my side of it. In Jackson, there's no sun inside the walls. Nothing to feed your soul. Months pass, then years, I could feel myself dying by inches. I was nearly at the end of me when I read the *Sonnets*. And they gave me a kernel of hope. That somehow I could survive that place, and have a life afterward. That something . . . wondrous was waiting for me. Some*one* wondrous. And then I saw the picture in the back of the book, and I knew who it was."

"The *Sonnets* were only a young girl's dream, Kevin. Nothing more."

"No. I think they were a message in a bottle, Claire. You were hoping the right person would read them, and find you."

"But you're not that person!"

"I think I could be. I want to be, more than anything. I know our timing's lousy but if you live to be a hundred, nobody will ever owe you more than I do, Claire. Or want you more. You asked what I wanted last night and I said nothing. That wasn't true. The truth is, I want everything. I want to read the Sunday funnies in bed with you, with your hair a mess. I want to lie beside you in the dark. I want to sit on a park bench with you on an autumn afternoon and watch the world go by. I want to make the hopes you wrote into the *Sonnets* come true. For both of us."

"My God." She smiled ruefully, shaking her head. "Where were you fifteen years ago?"

"In junior high. And we can't change that. All we have is right now."

"I'm sorry, Mr. McKay, but we don't even have that much."

It was a small thing, but her formal use of his name told him everything he needed to know.

"Okay," he said, rising. "I had to try. I hope I didn't offend you."

"Of course not, I'm flattered, but—"

Leaning across the desk, he suddenly kissed her on the mouth, holding it, until she pulled away, shaken.

"Sorry, I've wanted to do that for a very long time."

"Get out! Leave me alone!"

"Yes ma'am, that's exactly what I'm doing. Thank you for . . . well, everything. Have a good life, Claire."

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Shouldering his book bag, Kevin stalked out. She followed him to the door, locking it after he'd gone. Then smiled at the gesture. Locked doors weren't much of a deterrent for him. And she wasn't sure how much protection she wanted. If her ex had ever kissed her like that . . .

But he hadn't. And Kevin was twelve years too young. She'd made a safe, stable life for herself, and if it wasn't all lollipops and moonbeams, well, she wasn't a schoolgirl anymore. Double-checking the deadbolt, she went back to work at her desk.

But she couldn't seem to concentrate. She found herself staring at the door instead. Wondering if he'd walk back through it. And it occurred to her that she hadn't locked Kevin out.

She'd locked herself in.

Later that afternoon, Dina poked her head into Claire's office. "I see you dropped McKay's name from the class roll. Are you booting him?"

"No, he's leaving school."

"Leaving? Why?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't you?" Dina echoed skeptically. "That's too bad. He was a bit edgy but the guy's got talent to the max." And then she was gone.

Kevin took a final speech-therapy class with Mrs. Hockett, but skipped History of Western Civ. to finish packing. It didn't take him long. Jojo drifted in as Kevin was taking a final check around his dorm room.

"You bailing out today?" Jojo asked.

"This afternoon. Already bought a bus ticket."

"To where?"

"To none of your freakin' business."

"Hey, don't be a hard guy," Jojo grinned. "Ain't my fault you don't want to be rich. Here, take the grand." He slipped Kevin a tight roll of bills. "I'll walk to the station with you."

"To make sure I'm really gone?"

"You're a sad case, McKay," Jojo sighed. "No faith in human nature at all."

Matuso and Brad Bailey were cruising Conover Avenue in Beef's Camaro, trading hits on a joint, ogling the coeds. Suddenly Beef stiffened, swiveling his bull neck to stare out the side window.

"Did you see that?"

"What?"

"It's freakin' dog boy McKay! Walkin' with Jojo! We paid that lyin' pusher sonofabitch a thousand bucks to get rid of that punk, and instead they're out for an evening stroll, probably laughin' about how they screwed us!"

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"Hey, chill out, Beef, you don't know—"

"I know enough!" Matuso snarled, jamming on the brakes, whipping the car around in a U-turn. "You guys shoulda let me do that punk in the first place!" Matting the gas pedal, he raced the Camaro back the way they'd come.

"Man, what are you doing?" Bailey pleaded, clutching the armrest for dear life. "You can't—"

"Don't tell me what to do!" Matuso roared, eyes wild with steroid rage, white foam flecking the corners of his mouth. "Nobody screws us! I'm doin' 'em both!"

From across the avenue, Dina Cohen spotted Kevin walking a half-block ahead.

"Hey, McKay! Hold on a sec," she called, hurrying to catch up. Kevin didn't hear her but Jojo did. Turning, he smiled hello at Dina just as the speeding Camaro jumped the curb, splintering a bus bench, roaring straight at them! Thrusting Kevin aside, Jojo tried to leap clear. Didn't make it. The Camaro caught him waist high, smashing him down, crushing him under its wheels before it caromed off a power pole and slammed headfirst into a campus maple.

For a stunned moment, there was silence on the street. Then a *whuff*, as the Camaro burst into flames. And suddenly people were screaming, running away, trying to get clear.

Dazed, Kevin crawled to Jojo, dragging him away from the burning car, cradling him in his arms. Jo tried to speak, but could only cough up bloody froth.

"Hang on," Kevin pleaded. "Help! Somebody help us!" But the only answer was sirens wailing in the distance. Coming closer.

The interrogation room was a concrete cube painted institutional green, a metal table and two chairs in the center, a two-way observation mirror on one wall, and a video camera mounted in the corner. Very familiar place to Kevin. Too familiar. He tried to force down his despair but couldn't quite manage it.

A harried detective in shirtsleeves and blue jeans bustled in, thinning gray hair, square face, square attitude. Taking the seat across from Kevin, he zapped on the video-cam with a remote control, then flipped open a file folder.

"Detective Earl Novak, badge 721, first interview with Kevin Dean McKay. Is that your correct name, Mr. McKay?"

"You know my name, Detective, and my serial number. My life story's in that file so get on with it."

"It says here you did time for assault on a police officer. Got a problem with cops, Kevin?"

Kev looked away, didn't bother to answer.

"Well, just for the record, I don't have much use for convicts either so we'll call it even. What happened out there tonight?"

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"I was walking down the street with a friend. A car jumped the curb and ran us down. That's all I can tell you. Jojo didn't make it, did he?"

"Died in transit to the hospital. Sorry. You two were roommates?"

"He's been crashing with me. Anybody else dead?"

"The driver, Bobby Matuso, Beef to his friends. Pronounced dead at the scene. Did you know him?"

"We've met."

"I'll bet you have. Witnesses say his car veered off the street to go after you and Jojo. It never braked. In fact, he was speeding up when he ran down your buddy. Why would he do a thing like that?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't you? Do you own a gun, Mr. McKay?"

"A gun? Hell no. What are you talking about?"

"Matuso's passenger, Brad Bailey, says you pointed a gun at them, claims that Matuso drove at you in self-defense."

"That's a crock. Did you find a gun?"

"Not yet, but a bystander could have walked off with it. Bailey's from a good family, no police record, not even parking tickets. While you? Well, we both know what you are, Kevin. Whom should I believe?"

"Let me guess. The college kid?"

"Which one? You're a college man, too, McKay. You've even got college friends, which amazes me."

"What friends?"

"The editor of the *Westover Wildcat,* Dina Cohen, and a Professor Devlin. They got here five minutes after we locked you up and they're both pretty upset about your arrest. So why don't you lose the attitude and tell me the truth? There was something going on between you and Jojo and Matuso, Kevin. What was it?"

"What's the difference? You've already made up your mind."

"Try me. Maybe I'll surprise you."

"Fine," Kevin sighed. "I tried out for the cross-country team. The coach offered me a scholarship. Said they've always gone to basketball players but she wanted to change that. Matuso and some of the ballplayers said if I took a scholarship away from one of them it would hurt the team."

"You're saying Matuso killed your friend to protect the basketball team?" Novak snorted. "You can't expect me to believe that."

Kevin started to answer sharply, then hesitated. "No," he said slowly. "That's what they said, but it didn't make sense to me either. I thought they were spoiled punks used to getting what they wanted. Matuso's crazy, strung out on steroids, but the others aren't. And Jojo said it was something heavy. Even offered to cut me in. So there had to be more to it."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," Kevin said, massaging his eyes. "I truly don't."

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"Take your time, college boy," Novak shrugged. "You're not going anywhere."

But Kevin wasn't listening. He was focused inward, scanning through the slide projector of his memory, trying to recall the odd bits and pieces that didn't fit. . . .

"There are a couple of things that didn't add up at the time," he said slowly, as much to himself as Novak. "When Russ and Matuso tried to buy me off, Russ said his guys were only the bench, that their job was to keep games close. And Brad wisecracked something like, 'or not so close.' Only nobody laughed. They were torqued that he'd said it in front of me."

"That's it?"

"Not quite. Later on, they paid Jojo a grand to rough me up or run me off. When I asked him why, he made an odd cutting motion with his blade."

"Your buddy pulled a knife on you?" Novak's eyebrows arched.

"He was just getting my attention," Kevin said. "But . . ." Closing his eyes, Kev reproduced Jojo's odd figure-eight motion, slashing an imaginary blade past his cheek. "He wasn't threatening me," he said, blinking. "I think he was shaving."

"Shaving?" the cop echoed, scowling. "What do you—point shaving, you mean? You're saying Matuso and his pals are fixing games?"

"Not fixing them, exactly. Bench players couldn't lose a game they're supposed to win. But they could easily lose by more than the point spread. That's what Bailey was joking about, making the score 'not so close.' If they bet on the spread they could make a bundle."

"Most sports gamblers do bet the spread," the cop conceded. "On the other hand, you're an ex-con who'd say anything to beat a rap. So before I blow off your little fairy-tale theory, let me ask you one more question. That professor, Dr. Devlin? Are you bangin' her or what?"

Stunned by the question, Kevin didn't answer.

"I didn't think so," Novak went on. "She's way too classy for a punk like you. Thing is, though, she's really furious about us hauling you in. Chewed me up one side and down the other. She's out there on the phone right now trying to hire you an ACLU lawyer. Why would she do that?"

"She's . . . a great teacher."

"And a lousy judge of character, if you ask me. On the other hand, she must be a really smart woman, her being a professor and all."

Again, Kevin didn't answer.

"Tell you what, convict," Novak said, standing up. "I've got young Bailey in a room down the hall. And since I need more details about the disappearing gun, maybe I'll run your point-shaving theory by him. Just so I can tell your professor friend that I crossed all my t's and dotted my whatevers. Fair enough?"

"Fair's got nothing to do with this, Detective."

But for once, it did. When Novak pressed Brad Bailey about

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point shaving, the kid crumpled like a paper cup. Shaken by Beef's death and awash in self-pity, Bailey sobbed out the sad story of the jocks' easy-money scheme that had gone so terribly wrong. And fed his friends to the police like fish food.

A metallic voice echoed over the bus-station PA system, announcing a Greyhound departing for Indianapolis and South Bend. From the doorway, Claire Devlin scanned the mostly empty benches. An elderly man was slumped in a corner, sleeping, a shopping bag of his belongings at his feet, a mother and child were a little further on. And beyond them . . .

She made her way to the lone figure sitting near the exit and eased down on the bench beside him.

"You're still leaving," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Too much has gone wrong for me here," Kevin said. "I can't stay."

"I can understand why you'd feel that way. But you've come too far to let it end like this. If you quit now, your friend died for nothing."

"I'm not quitting, exactly. I'll keep writing, Claire, I just can't do it here. So I'm moving on. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Yes, but . . . Where will you go? How will you live?"

"I'll work, like everybody else. I'm pretty handy, I'll get by."

"And write whenever you can find the time?"

"Something like that. Why?"

"I have a proposition for you, Mr. McKay," she said, handing him an envelope. "I own a cabin in Oscoda that I seldom use. The address is in there, and a note 'to whom it may concern.' The place is a bit rundown, but you can stay there, free room and board. And write. You can pay me back when your first book sells."

"What if it doesn't?"

"Then your second book will. I know talent, Kevin, it's my business. This isn't charity or a whim. You're an investment."

"That's a very . . . generous offer. Why would you do this?"

"Every teacher dreams of making a difference. Of having one brilliant student who makes all the memos and budget conferences worthwhile. You're that student."

"I see," he said, considering the idea. "Thanks, but no thanks. It's very flattering, Claire, but I won't settle for being your protégé. It's not enough. I came here looking for the poet who saved my life."

"I'm sorry, Kevin. You're ten years too late."

"I don't believe that. Maybe some of your hopes got scuffed up but they're not lost forever. They're right where you left them, in the *Sonnets*. And believing in a book or a rabbit's foot or *any*thing, is better than nothing. Dammit, Claire, I'm the living proof—"

He broke off, looking away. Then took a deep breath.

"Christmas," he said abruptly. "I'll work at the cabin, but only until Christmas. I'm pretty handy, so I'll earn my keep there. And I'll try to finish my novel. The first draft, anyway. I'll come back

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over Christmas break, and you can check over my work. And we'll sort the rest of this out for good and all. We'll see if anything's . . . possible with us. Or we'll just move on. Okay?"

She nodded. "Fair enough. Until Christmas, then."

"And it may not be a fair trade, but I want you to have this," he said, handing her his book of sonnets. "It's the most valuable damn thing I own."

"You don't want it anymore?"

"You need it more than I do, lady," he said simply. "I know them all by heart."

He changed his bus ticket and they waited awhile together, mostly in silence, until his bus came. After it pulled out, she walked back to the campus alone, beneath the ancient maples, their leaves blazing crimson and gold. A gust of wind ruffled her sweater and she folded her arms around *The Sonnets of September,* holding the slim volume more closely, as if drawing warmth from it.

God. September was almost gone. October was coming on, with its frosty mornings and the scent of burning leaves. Lately it seemed that time was speeding up, that the years of her life were flying by ever faster.

September had always been her favorite month, marking the onset of autumn's amber season. But just this once, she wasn't sorry to see it go.

Christmas would come that much sooner. ●

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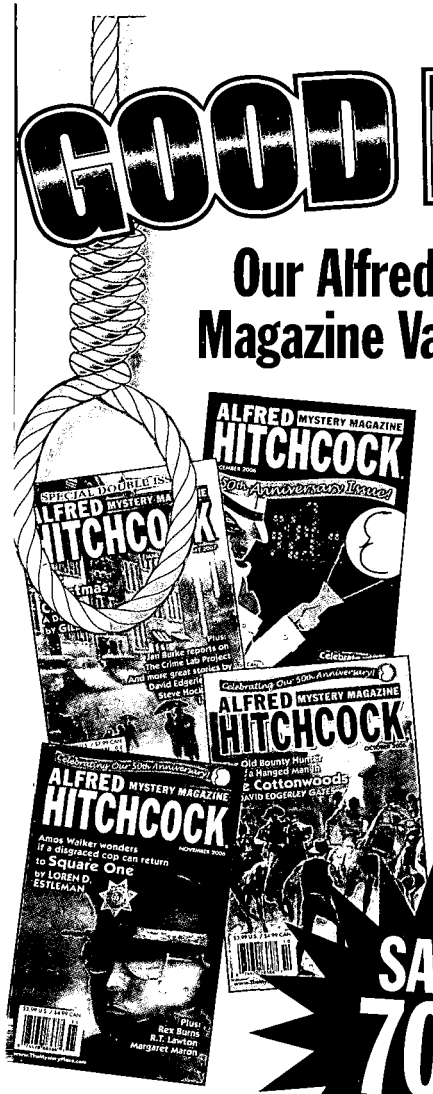

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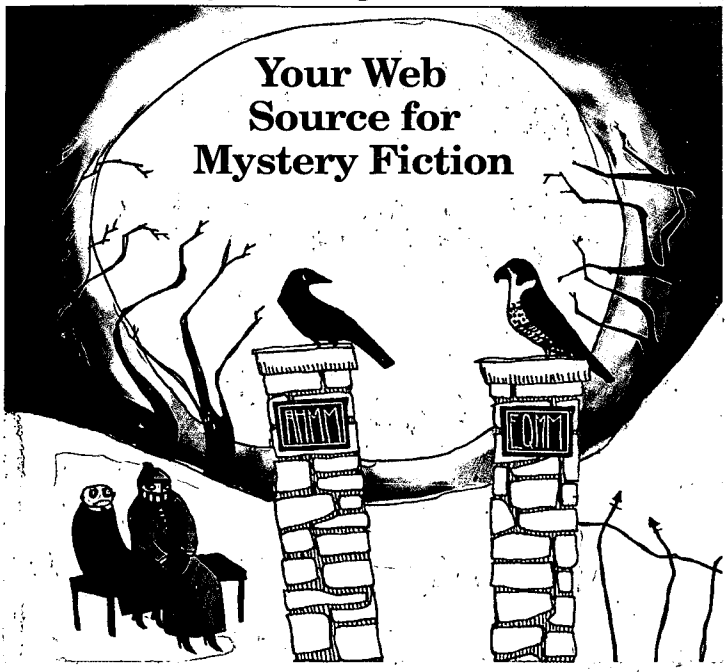

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